

Appendix: Case Study Material

Experience of Inspir=Ed Playgroup Project with Vulnerable families

The Inspir=Ed program has been implemented in six socially and economically disadvantaged communities in Australia – three Aboriginal (South-western Sydney, NSW Central Coast and Northern NSW, Australia) and three non-Aboriginal communities (South Sydney and Northern NSW, Australia).

The following narratives are from three Aboriginal parents who attended the programs, and three senior Aboriginal administrators. All communities programs were jointly delivered by a local playgroup leader and an InspirEd facilitator. The data derive from filmed and audio recorded interviews. The names have been changed.

Tanya was an Aboriginal mother of four children, aged twelve, nine, three and one. Tanya's husband was in jail when she participated in the Inspir=Ed playgroup program over three nine week periods in 2009 and 2010. Tanya's reflections were documented in interviews while attending the program and five years following the program. Tanya reflected *"I wasn't at a good time of my life at the time. I had a partner that was in jail, I had a lot of relatives with problems themselves ... if I didn't change my ways my kids could have got to the point where they got taken away."* *"it [Inspir=Ed program] makes you feel closer to your children – good bonding.... I had four children – youngest two year apart – [my parenting] was a bit all over the shop. It [the program] brought me back; sitting down and being with my children, not just occupying them."*

Tanya responded to the reconnection with nature and creativity modelled in the program: *"I bought my kids a lot of expensive stuff, if I learnt this when I had my oldest daughter, I would have saved a lot of money on toys. ... I found that my kids just love playing with all the natural toys They learn to play and – how can I say, they just make up their own stories, use their imagination a lot more."*

Healthy nutrition was another significant factor for Tanya and her children: *"I've noticed a lot*

of changes in my children... their behaviour especially when it comes to the food they are eating ... when I control their food and actually watch everything they eat ... they're just like normal kids ... if I gave them a fizzy drink, the next minute they're running around mad, whereas I learnt here like it's OK [to give them water]. Before they used to say, no we don't want water, you know and throw themselves around, but now they will just go yeah water and they'll just go and drink the water.... It's natural now and that's a big bonus for me, because I'd rather my kids drink water than cordial, even cordial."

The positive influence of the songs and stories were also commented on. Tanya observed *"my three year old used to sing songs from the radio's Top 40 like 'Shake My Booty' ... but now she wanders round the house singing the songs from the program. I think it's a lot nicer her singing those songs which are more appropriate for a three year old than those teenage songs."*

Tanya enjoyed the arts and craft aspect of the program in creating things of value and increasing her social connections. Commenting about the parents' art and craft time; Tanya noted *"[it was] peaceful, relaxing, purposeful, making something that has a purpose.... [You meet] people in the same situation, it was people dealing with the same stuff as you, that you can relate to. Sharing your learning experiences, everyone could relate."*

The modeling of rhythm in the program provided vital learning for Tanya: *"that's what the program showed me - the ebb and flow of things - in and out - at the program - the children had their time, I had my time - it made sense. That is why I incorporated it at home, the rhythm."*

Long term benefits for Tanya included reported increase in self-esteem, resilience and parenting skills. Tanya undertook further study in a Certificate Four in Community Development. Tanya now is a consultant computer programmer for medical services. Her eldest daughter, now aged 18 years, is finishing high school and is planning further studies. Her other three children are thriving. She is in a stable new relationship with a supportive partner.

The narrative of Ronald, a single father of three children, a six year old and twins aged four. Ronald was at constant threat of losing his children to Family Welfare services. He attended the program with his two younger children. Ronald's partner, the mother of the children, was in prison and his mother, who had helped him with the children, had recently died. Ronald had lived in the area for thirty years. He was from an Aboriginal/Irish family: *"The family used to fight against each other a lot – a lot of us kids grew up hard around here. We grew up the wrong way. We started drinking and smoking early, doing the wrong things."*

Ronald was constantly being pressured by the Family Welfare services who would visit his home without warning to check up on the children. Ronald was lacking basic parenting skills in how to best facilitate his love and concern for his children: *"I wake up every day for them. I just do what I can for them. I have done every parenting course that's around. I wish someone had told me about this earlier."*

Ronald increased his understanding of how to support his children's development. He introduced time in nature into his children's play. *"A lot of their plastic toys are now starting disappear They have started to play with sticks and rocks and mud. They are comfortable with playing with that in the yard now. Before they wanted their 'He-man' and their Barbie, and this and that. Now I let them make a mud pit and make a mess of themselves and they are happy."* Ronald increased his family's consumption of fruit, vegetables and wholefoods as a result of attending the program. *"I'm learning a lot of natural foods that the kids can eat, making of the bread, cutting up of fruits, we didn't have much of that in the house, and I've started to kick on with that, a lot, now since I have started at the program. Less lollies and chips."*

Ronald introduced songs and stories into the home. *"Ring a ring a rosie – my daughter loves that. The stories, the story time they want me to read a lot more now, because they sit there and listen."*

Ronald's self-esteem and confidence improved through learning new craft skills: *"I learnt finger knitting and I've learnt carving. I've always wanted to learn carving. I would love it (the playgroup sessions) to be longer, and went and done a bush walk, if it went 4–5 hours it would be great."*

The rhythm and the experiential learning assisted in helping Ronald with skills to manage his home environment: “[I’ve] *been learning to keep kids active, happy and safe. Before I would take kids to the park and then when we got home I would let them run amok ... the rooms are messy and you just let them do that. Now there’s the routine, the constant clean it up, do it, play with it.*”

Following Ronald’s attendance at the program he received permission from the Family Welfare services to move from the city to the country so that he could be with his extended family to help raise his children.

Maryanne’s narrative highlights how the program improved child-parent relationships and child behavioural problems through changes to the home environment and the children’s diet. Maryanne was an Aboriginal mother of three children aged eight, four and two. She was well-known to the Family services, where she had accessed many of their services for mental health and parenting concerns over a number of years. Her two younger children attended the program. Max, her 4 year old, was withdrawn and socially isolated. His problems included noncompliance (refusing to join in family dinners and other activities), low language skills for his age (he spoke only four words), difficulty in transitioning from one activity to another and obsessive/compulsive behaviours. Bethany, his sister, had poor language and communication skills. Maryanne attended the Inspir=Ed program for a period of nine weeks.

Maryanne introduced changes in the home environment, removing noisy and brightly coloured toys creating a more calming, natural environment. “[I have taken into the home] *the calm voice, and like playing with the children, and giving them the attention, and talking to them. I find when I sit down it is really important to interact with your children. Not sit down and ignore them, just to talk to them and have a conversation with them.*” Maryanne’s relationship changed with her children, which assisted her to feel “*a lot closer and more positive.*”

Maryanne found utilizing the elements of the program “*a lot more calming – I’ve tended to make the house a lot more calming, like [how] the facilitator introduced with the soft colours. I*

have made the house a lot more better too... it feels more comfy, they love it. I have made it not so all colourful, I have let everything blend in at home."

Changes were also made in the family diet: *"...introducing the healthy food. He [child] is starting to experience the healthy food. Not ignoring it – he's having a go at it. It's been great. The children love the bread ... they would rather eat that bread [whole-meal home-made] than the shop bought bread. I am going to have to go on making it for the kids I don't have any juice in the fridge anymore. They just have to go for water. They have to. I used to have the concentrated juice in the fridge and it's not in there anymore."* Maryanne and the children also started a small vegetable garden on the balcony of their unit.

Max's obsessive/compulsive behaviour changed and by the conclusion of the nine weeks Max's social and verbal skills had improved significantly. To Maryanne's surprise Max was assessed as ready for school *"I think that from the experience here that a lot from here has helped Max and he is ready for school now. with Max not so much playing on his own, interacting with the other kids, and interacting and talking with me as well. He has been doing that – not just playing at the table doing his army toys all the time, he has been interacting with everyone in the family ... he was really loud – I was a bit embarrassed at the start – I thought they might be thinking a little bit of a cyclone coming. And now – he's calmed down – come down."*

Learning new craft activities and songs and the experiential learning was an important factor that assisted Maryanne to make changes in her life. *"Just the craft, just all of the different stuff, it's amazing. Singing, I like that too. I think it's calmed me down as a parent. It's showed me how to. With the singing – a lot of the stuff what the facilitator does with the kids, how she talks to the kids."*

The following year Maryanne enrolled in physical fitness classes which she was attending every week. Her children were engaged in school and her youngest daughter was attending preschool.

The positive experience expressed by families is confirmed by community leaders.

The Inspir=Ed program was invited into an Aboriginal community on the outskirts of Sydney by **Belinda**, the Aboriginal Early Intervention Coordinator at the Aboriginal Medical Service. Belinda had attended an Inspir=Ed introductory workshop hosted by a state playgroup association.

Belinda was impressed by the cultural appropriateness of the program and the calming effect of the environment on the behaviour of the children. *“We had a couple of children who had big issues of behaviour and socialising with other children - and that's why they were coming along because the parents didn't know how to cope with that. There has been such a positive change in the behaviour of parents and children ... it's not a screaming match that they used to have with their kids. The program is really culturally appropriate - Indigenous people don't like to be overpowered by too many things, if you do things more gentle and subtle, and this program that's how it works. The calmness, working with the natural products, it's going back to the traditional way of things working with all the natural materials.”*

Frank, the Aboriginal CEO of the Medical Service and Corporation observed how the program helped strengthen the relationship between mothers and their children as well as contributing to a change in behaviour of the children. *“The kids – looked to me as problem kids, problem infants – ... they are screaming, they are fighting, they don't take any notice to their mums, they have really got out of control. And mum is stressed out, because I have seen them before – but eight weeks on [since attending the program], the mums are communicating better with the kids, the kids are more relaxed, the kids are playing with each other, no fighting, no screaming. And same with the mums are interacting with other mums and they look less stressed, they are even smiling.”*

Rebecca, an Aboriginal Family Support Worker with a regional Aboriginal cooperative, described the positive change in the behaviour of children when *“we packed away all the plastic and brought out all the wood and everything changed. The children's behaviour changed and I watched how the parents changed. Parents couldn't believe their improved children's behaviour by putting plastic away.”*