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through smarter social systems.**

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Pathways to a better quality of life for children and families through smarter social systems

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Children's development is influenced by many contexts and institutional settings, including families, schools, childcare centres, churches, and ethnic community groups. Positive development is more likely when the social systems that help shape these settings work in a manner that enriches children's environments and their access to resources. The capacity to work across contexts and maintain integrated systems of support for development is particularly important for children who experience family adversity and various forms of social and economic disadvantage that are known risk factors for healthy development. If for example schools do not form effective relationships with families or draw systematically on community resources to support students and their families, children's wellbeing may suffer.

Pathways to Prevention is a collaboration between the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance (Griffith University) and Mission Australia that has the support of the Queensland government and engages local schools and community groups as partners (Freiberg et al., 2005; Homel et al., 2006). The first phase of the *Pathways* project was implemented in 2002. From the beginning a key aim has been to bring together systems of support to enhance the wellbeing of children and families living in a disadvantaged area of Brisbane. This remains the broad objective. This article outlines the approach taken in the first phase of this project and describes how our current approach evolved in the light of the challenges we encountered in the early years.

Pathways in the first phase focused on supporting young children's adjustment to school. It combined school-based programs for children attending participating state preschools with community-based support for their families. Benefits of participation in program activities included improved behaviour and social skills among children as

well as improved social networks for families and more confident and positive parenting practices. Some of the distinctive aspects of the *Pathways* project that have contributed to its success include:

- Use of bilingual community workers supported by highly skilled professionals
- Ongoing staff training
- A clear project focus and strategy grounded in developmental theory
- Programs based on extensive research evidence but with highly flexible modes of implementation
- An emphasis on quantitative analyses of both processes and outcomes, supported by extensive qualitative data
- Ongoing cost-benefit analyses
- A wide range of family support, community development and parent empowerment programs that have been the vehicle for a high level of engagement with a broad range of families, including the most disadvantaged and vulnerable.

Despite the successes achieved by the project, many challenges have emerged. One challenge relates to the way existing organisational structures can sometimes limit the extent to which disadvantaged children gain access to the range and quality of resources they need. Traditionally this problem has been viewed through an organisational lens, with more effective interagency partnerships proposed as a solution. While we agree that it is extremely important that partner organisations work in mutually supportive ways to accomplish more than could be achieved working individually, or even together but in parallel, we are currently developing as the second phase of the *Pathways* project a problem-solving approach that begins with the child and their needs and leaves open the question of the precise organisational structures and relationships best suited to meeting these needs. This child-centred approach is challenging for participating organisations since it requires a rethink of well-established practices within what has traditionally been a pluralistic system of service provision and institutional practices.

The current *Linking to Learn & Learning to Link* phase of the *Pathways* project - together with its beacon program: *Circles of Care* - were developed as ways of putting our child-centred approach into practice. *Circles of Care* is a connection mechanism

conceptualised as a way of drawing programs and people together to make it easier for immediate comprehensive support to be mobilised around a child experiencing normal developmental challenges, or specific difficulties. *Circles* is based on a team approach where a small group for each participating child is created. A Circle is a team of educators, family support staff, family and community members who commit to work together and ‘be there for the long haul’ in support of the child at the centre of the circle. This core inner circle may be supplemented by people within a wider circle who can be called on, when necessary, to offer specialist support. The idea is to create supportive environments by focusing very deliberate efforts on the task of building relationships and connections across the systems and contexts that are critical to children: most notably their families, schools and cultural communities.

The function of each Circle of Care is to create a safe and accessible unit of support for each child and their family as a natural part of the school experience. Each Circle operates as a network of coordinated activity by pulling together whatever assistance or services are necessary to create the conditions that will contribute to the child’s success. *Circles of Care* is a proactive and preventive program. The key task of the Circle is to identify goals for the child’s positive development and then to plan and set in motion a set of strategies for achieving those goals. The foundations on which Circles are built are respectful relationships, a culture of cooperation, and a positive outlook or future orientation.

At a higher level of generality, the second phase of *Pathways* relates to how we can move from preventive successes ‘in miniature’ to large-scale, system-wide practices that open up opportunities for meaningful participation in mainstream institutions, thus improving individual developmental pathways in the wider community. While there are many barriers to such ‘upscaling’, Schorr (1998) identified one key factor: “*We have not acknowledged that the attributes of effectiveness are consistently undermined by the institutions and systems on which they depend for funding and legitimation*” (p. 19).

Our hope is that current work through *Pathways* will enhance our understanding of how to develop relationships and promote planning across systems to better meet children’s needs, and will shed light on organizational processes that facilitate and

hinder the development of strong connections between the primary institutional settings for children's development. By undertaking a systematic examination of institutional challenges and changes within the organisations that are central players in the *Pathways* project as they put *Circles of Care* and related innovations into practice, we aim to develop an understanding of how to improve system capacities in a practical way. It is our intention to use the lessons learnt from this work to develop a guidebook for child-centred practice across systems, hopefully creating a legacy for system change in many contexts.

The success of efforts to promote the positive development of all Australian children (and particularly the one in seven who live in relative poverty: UNICEF, 2005) will, in the end, depend on the willingness of the community services sector, together with major institutions such as schools, to modify structures, culture and practices in the light of children's needs, promoting strong connections between developmental settings for the enrichment of children's lives and their social environments.

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Ross Homel is Foundation Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia, Director of the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance, and a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. Professor Homel's career focus is the theoretical analysis of crime and associated problems, and the prevention of these problems through the application of the scientific method to problem analysis and the development, implementation and evaluation of interventions. He is particularly interested in prevention projects, like *Pathways to Prevention*, that are implemented through community development methods at the local level.

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