

Yanan Ngurra-ngu Walalja Halls Creek Community Families Programme

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Abstract

Home-based parent support is an important strategy for assisting parents to develop their parenting confidence and capacity, across a range of physical and psychosocial environments. Social, biological, environmental and family influences during the early years have lifelong impacts on children. The introduction of an Indigenous, peer-led parent support programme in a remote, socially disadvantaged town in Western Australia has allowed the local community to develop culturally appropriate strategies to support their own families. Their anecdotal evidence has demonstrated effective engagement with programme visitors with the families, using a partnership approach to promote behaviour and attitudinal changes to parenting.

Keywords: parenting, Indigenous parent programme, community partnership, home visiting, Community Mothers Programme.

What is already known on the topic:

- Family support in the early years is crucial to children's lifelong health and development.
- Home visiting is an established strategy to support parents in their role.

What this paper adds:

- Peer-led, Indigenous home visiting is improving the engagement of Indigenous families with parent support strategies.
- Working in partnership with Indigenous families facilitates involvement of Indigenous families in parent support programmes.
- The inclusion of culture and lore enhances the effectiveness of Indigenous parent support programmes.

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Introduction

This case study will describe the introduction of an Indigenous home visiting parent support programme in remote Western Australia. The town of Halls Creek has a population of 1,208, of which 850 or 70.4% are identified as Indigenous Australians¹. There has been a disproportionate number of crisis indicators within the Indigenous community, including alcohol and drug abuse, family dysfunction, literacy issues, dysfunctional behaviours and sexual abuse of adults and children². Through the Australian Better Health Initiative³, funding was sourced

to develop and implement an Indigenous-led, community-based parenting support programme. *Yanan Ngurra-ngu Walalja*, the Halls Creek Community Families Programme, is based on the Community Mothers Programme^{4,5}, which has been successfully implemented in the United Kingdom and Western Australia. Integral to the stability and ongoing success of programme activities are a local project coordinator and community care workers, all of whom are permanent Indigenous Halls Creek residents, who undertake the home visiting. Central to their involvement is an education agenda, undertaken by the Coordinator of the Community Mothers Programme (Western Australia), from the School of Nursing and Midwifery, Curtin University. Collaborative support is also given by the Office of Aboriginal Health, Western Australian Department of Health; Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service Council; Yura Yungi, Halls Creek Aboriginal Medical Service and Halls Creek Community Health Services.

Overview of *Yanan Ngurra-ngu Walalja*

The Halls Creek Community Families Programme has a developmental health focus addressing factors in the early years, which impact on children's physical and psychosocial development. It comprises a comprehensive home visiting strategy with a holistic focus on the family's child rearing environment, recognising psychosocial influences. The community care workers aim to support parents in an empowering way, encouraging them to find their own culturally relevant solutions with parenting challenges and other related problems. This involves strengthening the psychosocial and physical wellbeing of parents, assisting them in developing strategies to address their children's physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioural, educational and language development, along with general health and nutritional needs for the children and the whole family. There is an emphasis on early attachment between parents and children. Additionally, the programme facilitates community capacity to support families by encouraging liaison between community groups, Halls Creek support agencies and parents.

The Halls Creek Community Families Programme has been designed to be used in a variety of environments and can be applied in preventative, low-, medium- and high-needs situations. It is recognised that parents are situated in many differing circumstances and that the concept of family and the home environment may be varied; this being particularly relevant in Halls Creek with wider family members often undertaking caregiver responsibilities.

Aims and objectives of *Yanan Ngurra-ngu Walalja*

The aim is to create an environment fostering empowerment of parents by offering peer support and encouragement of the kind that allows parents to take positive control over their own lives and that of their children. It is also endeavours to advance community partnerships and development within the Halls Creek community. The specific objectives are:

- To support and encourage parents in their provision of a home environment that strengthens child functioning, including the areas of language, social and emotional ability, cognitive ability, early educational skills, nutrition and health.
- To support and encourage parents in making their own positive child rearing and life skill decisions.
- To encourage peer support through the linking and shared expertise of other Indigenous parents in the Halls Creek community.

- To establish and/or strengthen a sense of neighbourhood and community support in Halls Creek.

Key features of *Yanan Ngurra-ngu Walalja*

The key features of the Halls Creek Community Families Programme are based on evidence-based research and practice from the Community Mothers Programme^{4,5}. The concept of a universal visiting service is fundamental to this service and is offered to all parents with children aged 0–3 years and antenatal clients living in the town of Halls Creek. The programme uses clearly defined strategies of empowerment, which assist parents to focus on the early parenting environment and build up their self-esteem, enabling them to feel more confident in their role. Parents are encouraged and supported in finding their own parenting solutions.

Yanan Ngurra-ngu Walalja is maintained on a daily basis at Halls Creek by an Indigenous project leader. This strategy is designed to ensure short-term and long-term sustainability of the early parenting support, while the WA Coordinator is not present and for when the education programme has ceased. It is anticipated that long-term support will continue through videoconferencing. The WA coordinator currently travels to Halls Creek every 2 months to undertake education sessions, with the visits lasting 4 to 5 days. Videoconferencing is used between visits. The project leader has selected a group of strong women and men, who have elected to be called "community care workers", to be the home visitors. Criteria for selection were:

1. Positive standing in the community.
2. A desire to assist in programmes to help family and child health in Halls Creek.
3. Good communication skills.
4. Permanent, stable residency in Halls Creek.
5. The group membership encompassed all the differing local language groups.

Visiting consists of monthly visits of approximately 1 hour or longer as needed. Support work is undertaken using semi-structured methods and resources designed create a sense of shared endeavour between the visitor and the parents. Strategies to achieve the aims of the programme are developed between them, using the methods and resources that are achievable and available for each individual situation.

The concept of visiting in the home is flexible. Due to confidentiality, physical and emotional security issues, the

project coordinator and community care workers have noted that the women may not want visits in their homes. Visiting may then take place in other safe places such as the park. The male staff usually visit families in conjunction with the female community care workers, as well as supporting men who are the sole carers for their children and grandchildren.

Health promotion messages are facilitated through pictorial handouts, which have been demonstrated to be useful for people with English as a second language and other literacy issues. Funding has been made available through the Halls Creek project to develop new Indigenous specific literary resources, which are currently in progress. Implicit in the partnership with parents is an emphasis on preventative mental health manifested in parent self-esteem and confidence building. There is recognition that the visiting is not an end in itself, but a strategy that not only engages and supports families in health parenting, but also fosters their involvement in the lives of their local community.

Programme progress

In August 2007, the Community Mothers Programme coordinator undertook a briefing visit to Halls Creek, presenting programme ideas to a range of relevant agencies and people in the community, including the Medical Director of the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service Council, Department of Health Kimberley community paediatrician, representatives from the Halls Creek Town Steering Committee, Alcohol Support Service, Kimberley Department of Housing, Community Health Services and Department of Community Protection. Approval was given for the project to proceed and following funding, planning, evaluation and housing issues being finalised, the education programme for the community care workers commenced on 31 March 2008.

The model of partnership between the Community Mothers Programme coordinator, project leader and community care workers has demonstrated a 'bottom up' approach, where the members of the Indigenous peer support team are effectively driving the programme. They have become the reference group for the coordinator, where all home visiting strategies are tabled, discussed and modified for best effect in Halls Creek. Reflective practice is a key feature of education sessions where these approaches are constantly reviewed and further amended as necessary. Integral to the model is the inclusion of cultural respect and safety, along with recognition of cultural lore as foundations for practice within the programme. This is supported by a strong commitment by the community care workers to their own Indigenous community.

From the second education visit in June 2009, it was apparent that the programme had been generally well accepted by the Halls Creek community. Anecdotally, the community care workers' ability to actively listen in a non-judgemental manner was a catalyst for parents wanting to participate in the programme. Additionally, the project leader had purposefully allocated them to families according to appropriate Indigenous language and family groups. Visits were not commenced until verbal permission had been given to the community health nurses.

By the fourth education session in September, there were approximately 25 families being visited. These included foster parents, grandmothers and other extended family members who were actively caring for children. Community child health nurses and midwives have worked in partnership with the community care workers, attending education sessions where possible, supporting their work and encouraging the families to accept involvement in the programme. They have provided significant assistance, consequently being able to verify the efficacy of the home visiting and the diverse range of issues being managed by the community care workers, as well as providing suggestions for the progress of the program.

Of particular interest has been the adaptation of home visiting strategies to suit local situations and family dynamics. Instead of solo visiting, two to three community care workers engage with parents, in recognition of the combined talent of the group to deal with differing languages, family and cultural issues. This strengths-based approach acknowledges the respect shown to each of the peer support group in their knowledge of Indigenous lore.

This is a holistic programme, which views parent support and child and family health within the Indigenous understanding of health and wellbeing. The National Aboriginal Health Working Party⁶ describes this as being not just the physical wellbeing of the individual, but the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community, including a whole of life view. This is supported by Browne and Varcoe⁷, who emphasise the need for attentiveness to cultural issues in healthcare, recognising the impact of political, historical and socio-economic issues. A transdisciplinary approach is encouraged by the active inclusion of relevant agencies with the aim of encouraging families to link with the broader community in their journey towards empowerment and self-determination.

ABHI funding will continue to assist programme education and support until June 2010. As such, it is essential that a sustainability plan is situated to ensure ongoing accessibility by the Halls Creek Indigenous population. A Train the Trainer Programme commenced in June 2009 to strengthen the ability of the *Yanan Ngurra-ngu Walalja* to continue beyond the cessation of direct financial support.

Reflections

The *Yanan Ngurra-ngu Walalja* – Halls Creek Community Families Programme is based on primary healthcare principles and has the characteristics of a culturally safe programme. It has the ability to engage parents and community members involved in the care of children and develop strategies to support individual situations. The principles of primary healthcare, described by McMurray⁸ as being accessibility, use of appropriate technology, increased use of health promotion, intersectoral collaboration and public participation have been essential to the successful planning and implementation of this early parenting support.

Hutchins, Martin, Sagggers and Sims⁹ portray the features of culturally safe programmes and services as being:

- The employment of Indigenous staff.
- Reflexive non-Indigenous practitioners.
- Acknowledgement of the importance of relationships to successful programmes.
- Provision of transport to services.
- Incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world.
- The role of history: acknowledging the past and learning together.
- Holistic 'joined up' programmes, which meet the diverse intellectual, physical, social, emotional, health and wellbeing needs of children and their families.

The provision of early intervention parenting support to the Halls Creek Indigenous community has developed a model of practice recognising the importance of all these features. The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research has been engaged to undertake a formal evaluation of *Yanan Ngurra-ngu Walalja*, due in July 2010, which will be an important milestone in the programme's progress and an essential indicator as to its ability to achieve the intended aims and objectives.

Conclusion

Positive family functioning is an important influence on the physical, emotional and social wellbeing of children. Building family capacity to enhance nurturing environments for children is pivotal to their future physical, educational, social and emotional development and wellbeing, along with their capacity to successfully participate in their country's economic future. The ability of Indigenous children to travel this pathway along with their non-Indigenous counterparts has been compromised by generational cultural disadvantages. However, the ability of the community care workers in the *Yanan Ngurra-ngu Walalja*: Halls Creek Community Families Programme to deliver culturally safe, peer-led family support has demonstrated the beginnings of a sustainable and appropriate strengths-based initiative for individuals, families and the whole community.

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