

ANALYSIS SUMMARY

Raising community awareness of parenting

KEY FINDINGS

The report provides implications to inform the development of a community awareness-raising initiative about the importance of parenting in the early years. Implications are in five areas:

- developing messages
- messaging about parenting
- messaging channels
- campaign development
- communications research.

The report identified six exemplar Australian initiatives with national reach covering a broad range of universal parenting messages.

What can we learn from Australian initiatives that raise community awareness about parenting?

This summary is based on an analysis of existing Australian initiatives – such as websites or media campaigns – with community awareness-raising messages about parenting. The analysis was undertaken by the Parenting Research Centre and the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, and commissioned by The Australian Government Department of Social Services.

CONTEXT

Early childhood and the time before birth is a period of rapid development. A child's environment and experiences in these years have a lasting effect on the child's health, development, learning and wellbeing.

The early years present a critical window of opportunity for children. Prevention and early intervention can maximise an individual's potential, and minimise costly and less effective interventions later in life, benefiting individuals and communities.

In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments endorsed the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. Driving Change, the Third Action Plan of the Framework, commits to awareness-raising activities focusing on parenting practices to enhance safe and supportive environments in the early years. The analysis addressed Action area 1.1, Strategy 1, of the Third Action Plan.

The analysis aimed to inform the future development and dissemination of messages to build community awareness of parenting and the early years.

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020¹

Driving Change: Intervening Early – third three-year action plan, 2015-2018²

Strategy 1: Early intervention with a focus on the early years, particularly the first 1000 days for a child

Action Area 1.1: Increase community awareness of the importance of child development and parenting, and normalise families asking for help.

¹ <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/publications-articles/protecting-children-is-everyones-business>

² https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/12_2015/pdf_third_action_plan_for_protecting_australias_children.pdf

Raising community awareness of parenting

METHOD

The researchers identified Australian initiatives that aimed to raise awareness about parenting practices and strategies. They identified the initiatives by contacting key stakeholders in the child and family government and non-government sector (80 people in total were approached). To identify further initiatives, researchers searched online for Australian websites related to children and families.

Fourteen initiatives of greatest relevance to the project – those with national reach covering a broad range of parenting messages – were shortlisted. In compiling this shortlist, additional consideration was given to initiatives for Indigenous families; initiatives using text messaging; and initiatives with content relevant to families in vulnerable circumstances including domestic and family violence, mental illness, and substance abuse.

The researchers used existing evidence to assess the shortlisted initiatives and to develop the implications for future initiatives. The existing evidence was analysed by a rapid evidence assessment (REA) of studies on the effectiveness of messaging to parents from professionals, organisations and government.

Key attributes, or characteristics, of effective initiatives were drawn from this REA. These attributes were used to identify the exemplar initiatives, which also had greatest reach and range of messages, recency, and sustainability.

FINDINGS

Six exemplar Australian initiatives were identified from a short list of initiatives that communicated messages about parenting in the early years to a broad universal population.

The researchers used existing evidence on the effectiveness of messaging to parents to identify the exemplar initiatives. In addition, these initiatives had national reach and a broad range of messages, content was regularly updated, and they had longevity and likelihood of ongoing funding and support (sustainability).

In alphabetical order, the exemplar initiatives were:

- **Better Health Channel:** A Victorian government-sponsored website, which includes downloadable resources, videos and an app. The initiative provides credible and up-to-date health and medical information to the general public.
- **Health Direct:** An Australian Government Department of Health website with links and downloadable resources for the general public. The material includes health topics by life stages including pregnancy, babies and toddlers.
- **Kinderling:** A national online commercial radio station that is aimed at children aged 0-5 years and their parents. Kinderling provides children's content that is contemporary and grounded in Australia's culture, society and natural habitat. Channels include an app and live streaming.
- **Love Talk Sing Read Play:** A website, flip-charts and app that are designed to provide evidence-based information about the social and emotional development of children. Love Yarn Sing Read Play is the adapted version for Indigenous families, which includes the Deadly Tots app.
- **My Health, Learning and Development:** An information and records folder given to parents when their babies are born. It is designed for parents to use with health professionals, primarily maternal and child health nurses, until a child is five years old. It is a Victorian government initiative, but each state and territory across Australia issues their own child health record to parents at the birth of their child.
- **Raising Children Network:** A government-funded website providing evidence-based information to parents of 0-17 year olds. It includes downloadable publications, forums, apps and podcasts.

The report also identified implications for advancing community awareness initiatives. The implications were grouped into five key areas:

- developing messages
- messaging about parenting
- communication channels
- campaign development
- communications research.

Raising community awareness of parenting

USING THE FINDINGS: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Developing messages

Messages are more likely to achieve the goals of the initiative if they are accessible, understandable and credible, and present change as important and possible. The following implications have relevance for developing messages with the goal of raising community awareness about parenting, especially about the importance of early intervention and prevention.

Accessible and understandable

- Use plain language.
- Use visuals.
- Use metaphors to explain how an issue works and how it can be improved (see Serve and Return box below).
- Reflect diversity in communities and ensure cultural inclusiveness and appropriateness.

Credible

- Use a trustworthy messenger.
- Use the best available evidence.
- Use language that reflects what is known about the audience's values (see Tested Values box on page 4).

Empowering

- Identify solutions.
- Use strength-based messages that recognise the capability of individuals, families and communities.
- Support an individual's belief in their ability to effect change or take action.
- Use an optimistic tone to imply that goals are achievable.

Serve and Return

This example uses the 'serve and return' metaphor to explain the nature and importance of two-way parenting interactions.

When an infant or young child babbles, gestures, or cries, and an adult responds appropriately with eye contact, words, or a hug, neural connections are built and strengthened in the child's brain that support the development of communication and social skills. Much like a lively game of tennis, volleyball, or Ping-Pong, this back-and-forth is both fun and capacity-building.

[Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University¹](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return).

Messaging about parenting

Most Australians agree that parenting is important, but research indicates a lack of understanding of the systemic factors that affect parenting, such as government policy or program funding. The wider impacts of parenting on society are also often overlooked.

The report provides suggestions for the construction of parenting messages that may assist in tackling unproductive ways of thinking and encouraging a more nuanced understanding of effective parenting.

The suggestions arise from an evidence-based understanding of the nature of early childhood development, the influences on parenting, and how communities, systems and institutions can help. For future initiatives to convey that understanding, messages should acknowledge, build recognition of, and demonstrate or expand on, the following suggested inclusions:

Parenting and early childhood development

- Parents enable and play a key role in child development and learning.
- Two-way child-parent interactions contribute to development (see Serve and Return box, bottom left).
- Effective parenting benefits communities and society.
- Specify an age range when referencing early childhood, and define the first 1000 days.

Influences on parenting

- Parenting is the result of many influences, including community, society and government.
- Parenting skills can be learned.
- Effective support improves parenting skills.

Involvement in parenting

- Communities and societies have collective responsibility for parenting and child development.
- Government can be a partner in parenting – there is a relationship between government policies and programs, and effective parenting.
- Parenting is the equal responsibility of men and women.

¹ <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return>

Raising community awareness of parenting

Communication channels

Messages are disseminated through communication channels (see Examples of Communication Channels box below). To maximise the effectiveness of the message, developers should choose channels depending on audience preference, how many people the initiative aims to reach, and the initiative's implementation and dissemination strategy. The report presented the following implications for communication channels:

- Consider leveraging existing initiatives for the dissemination of messages.
- Consider state-based child health records as an option for reaching all parents and relevant professionals on a national scale.
- Align communication channels with the target audiences.
- Use multiple communication channels.
- Monitor and/or trial initiatives that use mobile phones for messaging.

Examples of Communication Channels

- Face-to-face
- Video
- Audio
- Apps
- Printed resources/products
- Website
- Forum
- Social media
- E-Newsletter
- Blog
- SMS/MMS
- Broadcast media – i.e. TV/radio

Campaign development

The report identified the need for community awareness-raising initiatives about parenting to be flexible, and able to be tailored to different audience segments. Building public understanding of parenting and the will for change is likely to require a multilevel effort over a number of years.

The implications for campaign development are:

- Develop core campaign messages that can be differentiated to meet the needs of distinct audiences.
- Develop a long-term commitment to the dissemination of messages to help ensure that messages are established, reinforced and endure over time.

Communications research

While existing research provides some indication as to what the Australian public thinks about early childhood and parenting (see Tested Values the box below), further research is needed to inform the development of suitable messages, including:

- pilot testing parent receptiveness to trial messages
- conducting research specifically for the development of messages for Indigenous communities
- embedding research and evaluation into the planning and implementation of new or adapted initiatives.

Tested Values

It's important to understand the values of the audience and to use messages that appeal to these values. Values should be tested to ensure that they orient audience thinking in a productive way. One tested value that resonates productively with the Australian public is 'future prosperity'. An example of a future prosperity value statement is: *Australia's future prosperity depends on the collective investments that we make in all of our children's development.*

[S.N. Bales and N. Kendall-Taylor¹](#)



¹ Bales, S. N., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2014). *Finding the Southern Cross: a FrameWorks Multimedia MessageMemo for the Centre for Community Child Health*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. Retrieved from: <http://frameworksinstitute.org/pubs/mm/southern-cross>.

Raising community awareness of parenting

SHORTLISTED INITIATIVES

The following table lists the 14 shortlisted Australian initiatives with community awareness raising messages about parenting. Sub-initiatives run by the same organisations are also shown. Exemplar initiatives are bolded.

Shortlisted Initiatives

Better Health Channel	https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Care for Kids' Ears	http://www.careforkidsears.health.gov.au/internet/cfke/publishing.nsf
Connecting2U	https://www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/chq/our-services/community-health-services/centre-childrens-health-wellbeing/connecting2u
Essential Baby	http://www.essentialbaby.com.au
Go for 2&5	http://healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/F_1/Go-for-2-and-5
Health Direct	http://www.healthdirect.gov.au/babies-and-toddlers-health
Don't go if you Don't Know	http://www.kidsafevic.com.au/road-safety/driveway-safety/don-t-go-if-you-don-t-know-driveway-safety-campaign https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0cU93r8sOs
Kinderling	https://www.kinderling.com.au
Love Talk Sing Read Play	http://www.families.nsw.gov.au/resources/love-sing.htm http://itsrp.resourcingparents.nsw.gov.au
My Health, Learning and Development: the Victorian Child Health Record	http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/parents/mch/Pages/record.aspx
PANDA: Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Australia	http://www.panda.org.au
Parenting SA	https://www.decd.sa.gov.au/parenting-and-child-care/parenting/parenting-sa
Raising Children Network	http://raisingchildren.net.au
SMS4dads	https://www.sms4dads.com

Disclaimer

This analysis summary was written by the Parenting Research Centre (PRC) based on analysis commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Social Services and prepared by the PRC and the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute (MCRI). The PRC and MCRI do not endorse any particular initiative presented here.

Initiatives included in this report represent a selection of those available in Australia in mid-2016 that met the inclusion criteria. Some relevant or equally important initiatives may have been omitted from this report. The rapid evidence assessment was conducted in June 2016 and searches were limited to studies published 2006 onwards. Readers are advised to consider evidence arising since these dates.

Conflict of interest

The PRC, the CCCH and the MCRI are co-developers of an initiative included in this report (Raising Children Network).