Report

YFS Sure Steps Evaluation

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Contents

[1. Executive summary 1](#_Toc518543007)

[1.1. Overview 1](#_Toc518543008)

[1.2. Methods 1](#_Toc518543009)

[1.3. Key findings 2](#_Toc518543010)

[1.4. Implications for the field 4](#_Toc518543011)

[1.5. Conclusions and limitations 6](#_Toc518543012)

[2. Introduction 7](#_Toc518543013)

[2.1. Background 7](#_Toc518543014)

[2.2. Description of the Sure Steps Program 7](#_Toc518543015)

[2.2.1. The Sure Steps program assumptions 8](#_Toc518543016)

[2.3. Examination of the evidence underlying the approaches used within Sure Steps 9](#_Toc518543017)

[2.4. Evaluation of Sure Steps 11](#_Toc518543018)

[2.4.1. Evaluation questions 11](#_Toc518543019)

[3. Methodology 13](#_Toc518543020)

[3.1. Ethics approval 13](#_Toc518543021)

[3.2. Families 13](#_Toc518543022)

[3.2.1. Interviews with families 15](#_Toc518543023)

[3.2.2. Family case reviews 15](#_Toc518543024)

[3.3. Interviews with Sure Steps staff and other stakeholders 15](#_Toc518543025)

[4. Results 17](#_Toc518543026)

[4.1. Engagement and implementation 17](#_Toc518543027)

[4.1.1. What strategies worked well to engage families? 17](#_Toc518543028)

[4.1.2. What types of support were provided to families? 18](#_Toc518543029)

[4.1.3. What were the critical success factors for the program? 21](#_Toc518543030)

[4.1.4. How did Sure Steps work with the Housing Service Centre for the benefits of the participating families? 22](#_Toc518543031)

[4.1.5. What activities and strategies made the biggest difference to families? 22](#_Toc518543032)

[4.1.6. Who might this program work best for and in what circumstances? 23](#_Toc518543033)

[4.1.7. How could this program be improved and inform future work with families? 25](#_Toc518543034)

[4.1.8. What was the observed cost effectiveness of the program? 26](#_Toc518543035)

[4.2. Outcomes 26](#_Toc518543036)

[4.2.1. To what extent was the program helpful in supporting tenancy stability? 26](#_Toc518543037)

[4.2.2. What improvements were achieved in parent and child wellbeing? 27](#_Toc518543038)

[4.2.3. To what extent did families achieve their goals? 31](#_Toc518543039)

[4.2.4. To what extent did the program assist in improving parental confidence and sense of control? 32](#_Toc518543040)

[4.2.5. Family satisfaction with the program 32](#_Toc518543041)

[5. Discussion 33](#_Toc518543042)

[5.1. Summary of findings 33](#_Toc518543043)

[5.2. Implications 36](#_Toc518543044)

[5.3. Conclusions and limitations 38](#_Toc518543045)

[Bibliography 39](#_Toc518543046)

[Appendix A Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form 41](#_Toc518543047)

[Appendix B Family Interview Schedule 50](#_Toc518543048)

[Appendix C Staff Interview Schedule 52](#_Toc518543049)

[Appendix D Stakeholders Interview Schedule 54](#_Toc518543050)

[Appendix E Sure Steps – Referral Protocol 56](#_Toc518543051)

Figures

Figure 1. Different forms of helping and outcomes...............................................................................7

Figure 2. Type and frequency of support provided to participating families ......................................19

Figure 3. Frequency of support provided in relation to the 'Wellbeing Wheel' ..................................21

[Figure 4. Changes in the Mental Health and Wellbeing domain 28](#_Toc518542602)

[Figure 5. Changes in the Sense of Belonging domain from first to last assessment 29](#_Toc518542603)

[Figure 6. Changes in the Family Resources domain from first to last assessment 29](#_Toc518542604)

[Figure 7. Changes in the Learning and Development domain from first to last assessment 30](#_Toc518542605)

[Figure 8. Changes in the Safety domain from first to last assessment 30](#_Toc518542606)

[Figure 9. Changes in the Physical Health domain from first to last assessment 31](#_Toc518542607)

[Figure 10. Familes’ goal achievement 31](#_Toc518542608)

Tables

[Table 1. Number of families who participated in the Sure Steps program and the evaluation 14](#_Toc518542507)

[Table 2. Household information for the families participating in the evaluation 14](#_Toc518542508)

[Table 3. Age range of children in the families who participated in the evaluation 15](#_Toc518542509)

[Table 4. Summary of stakeholders taking part in the evaluation 16](#_Toc518542510)

# Executive summary

## Overview

This report presents findings from the evaluation of the early development and delivery of the Sure Steps program. Sure Steps was implemented as a one year pilot program initiated by YFS Ltd Logan in collaboration with Logan Together and funded by the Queensland Department of Housing and Public Works. It is a family coaching program that provides support for families living in public housing who have a child under the age of eight years. The program proposed a new way of working with families, based on the assumption that facilitated identification of parental aspirations for their families, supportive relationships with Family Coaches and validation of parents as experts for their family needs can lead to greater engagement and participation in the program and subsequently to better outcomes.

## Methods

We employed a mixed method pre-post single group design to address the evaluation questions. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed. The data sources included:

* Interviews with Sure Steps staff (n = 3)
* Interviews with families taking part in the Sure Steps program (n = 7)
* Interviews with other stakeholders
  + Reference Group members (n = 4)
  + Sure Steps funder (n = 3)
  + Referrers to the Sure Steps program (n = 1)
* Routinely collected data from YFS Ltd client and case-management database (n = 10).

Data was analysed to compare and contrast participants’ perceptions of the implementation and early impact of the Sure Steps program. Data analysis combined descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, as relevant.

This report focuses on the following evaluation questions:

1. Engagement and implementation - what factors helped to engage families and was Sure Steps implemented as intended?
2. The Sure Steps program outcomes - to what extent did Sure Steps achieve the intended outcomes of the program?

More specifically, the evaluation sought to answer the following:

Engagement and implementation:

* What strategies worked well to engage families?
* What types of support were provided to families?
* What activities and strategies made the biggest difference to families?
* What were critical success factors for the program?
* Who might this program work best for and in what circumstances?
* How could this program be improved and inform future work with families?
* What was the observed cost effectiveness of the program?

Outcomes:

* To what extent was the program helpful in supporting tenancy stability (e.g., reduction in breach notices for participating families)?
* What improvements were achieved in parent and child well-being?
* To what extent did families achieve their goals?
* To what extent did the program assist in improving parental confidence and sense of control?

## Key findings

This summary of findings is based on data collected in the eight-month period, from September 2017 to May 2018, and refers to the early stages of Sure Steps development and implementation. Here we present a summary of the key findings that are outlined in detail in the following report.

***Engagement and Implementation***

Overall, the findings indicated that Sure Steps used a number of innovative strategies that suggest were helpful in facilitating family engagement with the program:

* Putting families in the 'driver's seat' and allowing them to choose their goals
* Placing the focus on building strong coach-family relationships and rapport
* Adopting a strengths-based approach
* Adopting an aspirational focus, and
* Seeing families as experts.

The Sure Steps program provided a range of supports for families. The three most common types of support in the client and case-management database were advocacy, school relationships support and providing information to families. This was followed by organising community connections and/or recreational activities, financial/material support, safety planning and domestic and family violence support.

Program supports were also classified against six wellbeing domains, as measured by the ‘wellbeing wheel’. The ‘wheel’ was developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) in 2010. Based on the ecological model of child development, ‘the wheel’ includes the following domains that were identified from best practice models used in the context of child wellbeing and child protection:

* Emotional wellbeing and mental health
* Relationship and sense of belonging
* Learning and development
* Safety
* Family resources, and
* Physical health.

Supports for mental health and emotional wellbeing and for family resources were the most commonly recorded. The least common domains included safety and physical health. These results corresponded with the families' views about what types of supports were most helpful for them. Participating families frequently endorsed the following activities and strategies as those that made the biggest difference for them: financial support, advocacy, receiving information about and being linked with services and communities, and receiving support with court attendance and school relationships.

However, some discrepancies in opinion were noted in relation to supports that were needed regarding safety issues. While interviews with Sure Steps staff members indicated that an unexpectedly high number of families with frequent and severe domestic and family violence issues participated in the program, this area was not flagged in the family interviews.

Staff reported that domestic and family violence concerns often needed to be addressed immediately with families, and took a priority over the developmental component of the program. In addition, these significant issues in some cases posed a threat to tenancy stability of the families, although no participating families were evicted during the course of the evaluative window. The focus on child development was further limited by the running time of the Sure Steps program at the time of the evaluation, as families may have benefited from more time to address pressing issues before they were able to focus on the developmental component of the program. It was also perceived by some informants that the program's emphasis on the child's development might not have been the best fit for individuals who have been parents for a longer time and have older children.

Participants generally agreed that the following factors were critical in the program achieving positive changes for participating families:

* The voluntary nature of the program, whereby a decision whether to take part in the program rests entirely on the family
* The nonprescriptive aspect of the program, with families making the ultimate decision about their priorities, goals and aspirations
* Flexibility of the program in terms of the worker's availability
* The program's strengths-based approach
* The program's strong emphasis on building relationships and rapport with families.

While the scope of the evaluation did not include a cost-benefit analysis and did not provide objective evidence of value for money, the views of evaluation participants were consistent that the program produced reasonable and positive outcomes for the families, and also provided an opportunity to strengthen the links between the Department of Housing and services in the community for participating families.

***Outcomes***

The Sure Steps program was unanimously evaluated positively and perceived, overall, to be helpful for all participating families. While the program was believed to produce relatively quick and greater changes for younger or first-time parents and those who were motivated to work on their family's aspirations, other families with many complex needs still benefited from Sure Steps but achieved the benefits at a slower pace. Ideal length of service will be a focus for future practice development, and for the next evaluation phase.

The families taking part in the evaluation believed that the program was very helpful for them and expressed a very high satisfaction level with the Family Coaches. The reported improvements included:

* becoming more independent
* being more aware of what services and supports were available in the community
* increased understanding of parenting, and
* becoming increasingly skilled in dealing with children's challenging behaviours.

Sure Steps staff also reported some observable changes in relation to parental wellbeing, including improvements in their mental health, daily functioning, social connections and confidence. The evaluation interviews with representatives of the Department of Housing indicated that the Sure Steps program also made some differences by assisting families to stabilise their tenancy issues, such as addressing their tenancy arrears or moving to more appropriate accommodation.

Additional changes were recorded in relation to the six wellbeing domains, as identified on the ‘wellbeing wheel'. The results indicated that families moved from experiencing challenges in a particular domain at their first assessment to functioning adequately or even experiencing strengths in the same domain at the subsequent assessment. While often these changes were small and a small number of families exhibited strengths on the domains in their final assessment, all changes were made in positive directions. These results are important due to the complexity of families that Sure Steps worked with, and the limited time applied to address their presenting concerns at the time of the evaluation.

## Implications for the field

**Recommendation 1: Consider clearly defining the program components/or re-examine the program logic in light of the early evaluation findings**

As Sure Steps was a pilot study, it was testing the elements of the program that could work well for participating families. As some elements, such as focus on the child development, were not comprehensively addressed with all participating families, it might be beneficial to re-examine the program components and/or the program logic in light of the early evaluation findings.

**Recommendation 2: Consider testing and replicating the model with different target populations**

While the Sure Steps program produced beneficial results for all participating families, there were some opposing views as to who the program is best suited for. Some participants suggested scaling up the program and removing the eligibility criteria, while others believed that it might be better to use it with younger and first-time parents who showed the greatest improvements during the program's early implementation phase. Thus, it might be beneficial to replicate and evaluate the program with different cohorts in the future to identify any differences in the effectiveness of the program.

**Recommendation 3: Consider linking the program with another community program**

Due to the small size of the team, and the variety of presenting family concerns such as significant domestic and family violence and intergenerational trauma, it might be beneficial to link Sure Steps with another program in the community so that the staff can be better supported and the program can be managed and delivered more efficiently.

**Recommendation 4: Consider an extension of the program to allow for a follow up of participants to further determine the program’s long-term effects for families and their children**

This report reflects preliminary support for the positive early impact of the Sure Steps program that was achieved in a short eight-month period. While all participants agreed on the benefits for vulnerable and complex-needs families during the program's early implementation, it would be beneficial to investigate whether these initial benefits had been maintained over a longer period of time. Therefore, an extension of the program, to allow for following up parents and their children should be considered. Any program extension should also have an evaluative component to build upon the findings of this report. It is recommended that, from the point of engagement, all families participating in the program consent to the use of de-identified information for evaluation purposes.

**Recommendation 5: Consider a longer intervention period to allow for the time needed for engagement/rapport**

Sure Steps program provides support for vulnerable and complex-need families, who often present with trust issues and difficulties sustaining their involvement with services. As working with these families requires a very sensitive approach that matches their learning pace, a longer intervention period might be beneficial to be able to engage these families, earn their trust and assist them in addressing their deeper concerns.

**Recommendation 6: Consider having a larger team of workers**

Having a small number of Family Coaches was perceived as both a benefit and barrier to the program implementation. The small team worked well together and workers complemented each other with their unique set of skills. However, in light of many families experiencing significant domestic and family violence which required support from two workers at a time, it was difficult to attend to all families in a timely manner. Depending on the course that the program takes, having a larger team might be considered if the program continues to work with vulnerable families with many complex needs and severe safety issues.

**Recommendation 7: Consider how the program can align better with funder priorities and procurement processes**

The results suggested the source of the funding focussed the program cohort in a particular way.

For example, contract negotiations between the provider and the funder settled a number of issues:

* The funder required the Sure Steps program to work with families with children from zero to eight years of age and did not take up the provider’s suggestion to focus on the first 1000 days. This led to families with older children participating.
* Requirements that families needed to be exhibiting early signs of tenancy difficulty may have added to the complexity of referred families, but there is no evidence it prevented interested families from being accepted into the program and, in fact, could have further motivated families to join the program.
* A request to delay the start of the program delivery to allow a ‘ramp up’ period was not reinforced by the funder, leading to low numbers until operational set up and community awareness led to successful referrals a few months after the program commencement.
* Family Coaching support was limited to families who were in the public housing system. As some families decided to move to the private rental market during their involvement with Sure Steps, this terminated their eligibility to continue taking part and receiving supports form the program. This might have been detrimental to those families, as Sure Steps was often the only support they were willing to receive or the only support available to them.

Therefore, it might be beneficial to consider strategies to better align the program with priorities of the funder and procurement processes.

**Recommendation 8: Consider whether there are circumstances when Family Coaching is an inadequate response for participating families**

Family Coaches encountered many instances of working with families who experienced more frequent and more severe levels of domestic and family violence than initially anticipated. This has raised safety concerns and subsequent notifications to the Department of Child Safety. While the program's underlying philosophy is to allow families to lead the program and decide on their aspirations, these safety concerns have raised questions within the team about whether there is an inflated view of the Sure Steps service as a protective factor by the child protection system for families vulnerable to child harm. Whilst Sure Steps worked collaboratively with other services to address risk that the families perceived (see Figure 2), when the team made notifications to Child Safety, this did not always result in an offer of more intensive support from elsewhere. This gap in addressing the perceived needs of families should remain an ongoing practice consideration for the Sure Steps approach, to ensure the Coaches operate within their sphere of competency and capability.

## Conclusions and limitations

The findings suggested that the Sure Steps program was implemented as intended and perceived positively by a range of stakeholders. Overall, there was agreement among participants that the program’s core aspects of being aspirationally focused, led by families, flexible and directed at the family as a unit, produced positive changes for participating families and great satisfaction with the program.

Several limitations of the evaluation were noted. These include the small number of families who agreed to participate in the evaluation, a strong reliance on qualitative data and thus on participants’ attributions, and lack of a comparison group. Nevertheless, there was strong agreement in the data collected through interviews and the program implementation database, which adds support to the outcomes identified in this report.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the current evaluation, the promise of the Sure Steps program is clear. In this early stage of program installation, the evidence outlined in this report attest to the value of the program for families at risk of tenancy loss in addition to other risks strongly associated with child vulnerability.

# Introduction

## Background

The Sure Steps program was initiated by YFS Ltd in collaboration with Logan Together and funded by the Queensland Government Department of Housing and Public Works. YFS Ltd is a not-for-profit organisation that delivers a wide range of services to the people of Logan and surrounding areas. The Parenting Research Centre was commissioned by YFS Ltd to evaluate the initial development and the early implementation of the Sure Steps program. Sure Steps started to operate in September 2017, with most families joining the program in November and December. This evaluation report describes how Sure Steps has been implemented in its early stages of development and installation, and explores stakeholders' perceptions about the process and early impacts of the Sure Steps program. This document reports findings from data collected over an eight-month period from September 2017 till May 2018.

## Description of the Sure Steps Program

Sure Steps was implemented as a one year pilot program, investigating what family coaching could look like for families living in public housing who have a child under the age of eight years. Working with public housing tenants has provided Sure Steps with an opportunity to support people who, as part of an assessment to see if they qualify for support, are identified as suitable for family coaching. The Sure Steps program aims to test a new way of engaging and working with families who are highly vulnerable and have complex needs. As indicated in the ‘different forms of helping’ diagram (Figure 1), Sure Steps places emphasis on providing supports ‘*through’*, and at times ‘*with’* families, to assist them in achieving their aspirations and thus improve their child’s long-term outcomes.

Figure 1. Different forms of helping and outcomes (Moore, 2014)



The program employs a two-generational approach and aims to support parents improve their own wellbeing and foster their children’s development. Sure Steps used the following strategies to achieve these goals:

* Helping parents understand what children need in the early years
* Encouraging parents to set goals for their family and their children
* Supporting parents to take action to achieve their goals
* Ensuring parents maintain stable and affordable housing

The program assists families by helping them to articulate their aspirations for themselves and their children and then supporting them to achieve these goals. The Sure Steps program seeks to:

* Improve the prospects (opportunities to learn, grow and thrive) of children whose parents participate in the program
* Improve wellbeing of families who take part in the program
* Identify service system improvements and opportunities that can help vulnerable families achieve their goals.

Sure Steps is informed by a strengths-based approach and aims to address family goals to improve child and parent wellbeing. As a new program, the service seeks to test alternatives to traditional family support programs and to identify service system improvements that may support vulnerable families to achieve their goals. The program aims to test and refine the proposed critical success factors that include:

* Stability (maintained tenancy)
* A positive hopeful/future orientation (goal setting and achievement)
* Sense of control/agency in decision making (a belief that goal achievement is possible)
* Understanding about children’s needs
* Overcoming service system barriers (in terms of access to appropriate supports, but also re-considering the value of traditional approaches to case management, ways of working with families and funding frameworks).

### The Sure Steps program assumptions

Sure Steps is based on the following assumptions:

* Program Assumption One: Family Coaches will engage better with families around understanding and creating environments for their children to thrive, if families have the potential for stable housing through their public tenancy.
* Program Assumption Two: Positive engagement with Family Coaches to support families to understand and be able to better respond to their child’s developmental needs can be a ‘circuit breaker’ for intergenerational disadvantage and homelessness
* Program Assumption Three: All families have hope, and the capacity for joy and excitement in raising children. This hope, and a facilitated identification of parental aspirations for their child, can provide the basis for positive changes and a supportive relationship with a Family Coach.
* Program Assumption Four: Families will be motivated to engage with the program if the offer (relative advantage) is attractive and if it also validates their role as experts to co-design the program.
* Program Assumption Five: The Logan Together network can be mobilised to ‘cut through’ service system barriers so that participants can access the interventions they seek, when they need them.

## Examination of the evidence underlying the approaches used within Sure Steps

Sure Steps is available to families living in Logan public housing who are at risk of losing their tenancy and who have at least one child aged under 8 years. To understand the evidence underlying the core elements of the Sure Steps model, we have conducted a brief literature scan on programs and practices aimed at working with vulnerable and complex needs families. Below we describe evidence underlying the core elements of the YFS Sure Steps program.

While many services claim they are family led, the reality is that families do not get to choose their goals and how they work on them due to other pressures, such as outcomes that are funder driven or the case plan managing the relationship rather than the other way around. Sure Steps is underpinned by a family coaching approach in which coaches support families to identify and address goals, with a particular focus on child development. Family self-identified aspirations are central to the support provided. According to Allen and Huff (2014), family coaching is a process in which the family and a practitioner work in partnerships to ‘foster the achievement of family-identified goals’ (p. 569). The approach is strengths-based and aims to build family capacity and growth (Allen & Huff, 2014).

A family coaching program with multi-problem families was evaluated in the Netherlands (Tausendfreund, Knot-Dickscheit, & Pos, 2014). This program involved multiple service components delivered to families over time in the home. The evaluation followed families yearly for over four years (n =122 at baseline; n = 6 by time four). Findings suggest that the program was associated with a reduction in family stress, particularly during the first year.

Family coaching has also been used with some success in other fields. For example, family coaching to improve nutrition and physical activity has been found to contribute to family engagement in activities and progress towards goals (Heimendinger et al., 2007).

Sure Steps families receive various forms of support from Family Coaches. The type of support offered is driven by the goals identified by the families. Coaches draw on evidence-based approaches (e.g., 123 Magic, Bringing up Great Kids) and the right ‘fit’ for families is determined by the Coach and families combined.

One of the key resources available for Sure Steps coaches is the 'wellbeing wheel' developed by Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) in 2010 and also known as ‘Tune into Little Ones’ wheel. The wheel has been adapted by Sure Steps program design and family characteristics and its use is further described in Section 4.1.2 of this report. The literature suggests that the 'wheel' can be used to help coaches understand the needs, strengths and areas of vulnerability of children up to the age of two years by mapping these on a ‘wheel’. While it is not known if the use of the wheel itself has been evaluated, the contents of the resource kit described by the developers as evidence-informed, providing information on typical child development, as well as potential vulnerabilities within families. Avenues for support are also provided in the kit (<https://territoryfamilies.nt.gov.au/children-and-families/tune-in-to-little-ones>).

YFS has identified that coaches are trained in the Abecedarian approach. The Abecedarian approach is a set of evidence-based learning strategies for use by parents and early childhood educators. A systematic review of early childhood development programs for children aged 3 to 5 years who are at risk due to family poverty included three papers reporting the effects of the Abecedarian approach in Carolina, USA (Anderson et al., 2003). The systematic review identified that the studies used were of good quality. Findings suggested that the program resulted in a significant improvement in child academic achievement and child IQ, and also in a reduction of children being held back a year at school and in special education placements. Follow-up, longitudinal studies have found that benefits are observed into adulthood, with significant improvements seen for intellectual performance, reading and writing at age 21 (Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal, & Ramey, 2001). Those who participated in Abecedarian were also less likely to become adolescent parents or to use marijuana by age 21 (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller- Johnson, 2002). Educational attainment and level of consistent employment were also significantly higher compared to control participants at age 30 years (Campbell et al., 2012). Australian studies into the effects of this approach are underway.

Another approach available for use by YFS Family Coaches is the parenting program Bringing up Great Kids. This is an initiative of the Australian Childhood Foundation and it aims to improve communication and relationships between parents and children.

The program has been independently evaluated by Deakin University (Staiger et al., 2006) using a pre-post-follow up design with mixed methods involving a small number of families (n = 39). Findings indicate that parents felt the program improved the quality of time they spend with their children and their parenting skills. Parents also indicated that their communication with their children and their parenting confidence improved.

Families participating in Sure Steps may also access Sing and Grow music therapy programs for children with additional needs or those at risk of disadvantage. In a pre-to-post study of Sing and Grow with children with a disability (Williams, Berthelsen, Nicholson, Walker, & Abad, 2012), significant improvements were observed for parent-reported mental health symptoms and child communication and social skills. Clinician-observed improvements were also found for various parenting behaviours. In another study involving young parents and socially disadvantaged families, as well as those with a child with a disability, pre-to-post findings suggest that parents experienced improvements in irritability overtime as well as improved mental health. Child communication and social skills also improved in this study (Nicholson, Berthelsen, Abad, Williams, & Bradley, 2008).

A further resource for families involved in Sure Steps is First Five Forever. This is a literacy initiative based in libraries that is designed to improve parent-child communication and outcomes in children aged 0 to 5 years. First Five Forever focuses on using everyday parent-child activities and routines. This initiative is underpinned by research that emphasises the importance of the home learning environment and nurturing parenting, and the importance of the first five years of life in terms of brain development (<http://first5forever.org.au>).

Sure Steps is also influenced by three key documents:

* 'Engaging and partnering with vulnerable families and communities: the keys to effective place-based approaches' (Moore, 2015)
* 'Thriving children, successful parents: A two-generation approach to policy' (Schmit, Matthews, & Golden, 2014)
* 'Strengthening prevention and early intervention services for families into the future' (Toumbourou et al., 2017).

Engaging and partnering with vulnerable families and communities: the keys to effective place-based approaches (Moore, 2015) describes actions that need to be taken at various levels of care, education and intervention and at the level of community and society, to improve the way we work with vulnerable and marginalised families. Established methods of effective help-giving are summarised, and the author draws on recent literature reviews to identify strategies for engaging vulnerable families. There is an emphasis on partnerships and relationships with communities and families, and a framework for services delivery is described.

Thriving children, successful parents: A two-generation approach to policy (Schmit, Matthews, & Golden, 2014) emphasises the need for policies to centre on child and parents, rather than on one generation or the other. The paper describes the issues inherent in policies that are exclusively child-focused or adult-focused and the particular risks for lower income families, such as those participating in Sure Steps. The benefits of a two-generation approach are discussed, as are suggestions for how this approach could be implemented in policy.

Strengthening prevention and early intervention services for families into the future (Toumbourou et al., 2017) draws on published documents and policy, reviews, and expert opinion to describe how family-based prevention and early intervention can prevent key social and health problems. Risk and protective factors are described, along with theories driving frameworks for prevention and early intervention. The economic benefits of prevention and early intervention are highlighted and suggested existing approaches are described. The paper concludes with recommendations for the use of family-based approaches in prevention and early intervention.

Sure Steps includes many elements drawn from evidence-based programs or practices as well as some evidence-informed resources to provide support for families living in public housing.

## Evaluation of Sure Steps

The current evaluation of Sure Steps explored how the program was implemented in the early stage of program design and installation, along with early outcomes for participating families. The evaluation included both process and outcomes components which were based on qualitative and quantitative data sources. Findings from each method were triangulated to strengthen conclusions.

### Evaluation questions

The evaluation addressed the following key questions:

1. Engagement and implementation - what factors helped to engage families and was Sure Steps implemented as intended?
2. The Sure Steps program impact - to what extent did Sure Steps achieve the intended outcomes of the program?

More specifically, the evaluation sought to answer the following:

Engagement and implementation:

* What strategies worked well to engage families?
* What types of support were provided to families?
* What activities and strategies made the biggest difference to families?
* What were critical success factors for the program?
* Who might this program work best for and in what circumstances?
* How could this program be improved and inform future work with families?
* What was the observed cost effectiveness of the program?

Outcomes:

* To what extent was the program helpful in supporting tenancy stability (e.g., reduction in breach notices for participating families)?
* What improvements were achieved in parent and child well-being?
* To what extent did families achieve their goals?
* To what extent did the program assist in improving parental confidence and sense of control?

# Methodology

The evaluation employed a mixed method design to address evaluation questions. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed, including consultations with Sure Steps staff, families taking part in the Sure Steps program and other stakeholders including the Reference Group, Sure Steps funder and referrers to the Sure Steps program. Routinely collected data from the YFS Ltd client and case-management database were also used in the evaluation.

## Ethics approval

The evaluation received ethics approval from the Parenting Research Centre Ethics Committee. As such, only data from families who specifically consented to take part in the evaluation were to be included in the evaluation. However, in the future Sure Steps and the funder have the ability to analyse data from all participating families for operational and planning needs.

## Families

Families taking part in the Sure Steps program must meet the following eligibility criteria (agreed between YFS Ltd and the Department of Housing):

* Live in public housing in Logan (or community housing by permission from the Department)
* Have at least one child under 8 years
* Are demonstrating early signs of tenancy difficulties
* Have an interest in knowing more about child development and express interest in participating in the project.

Sure Steps coaches invited families to take part in the evaluation. Prior to inviting families to participate, the evaluation team and Sure Steps had a meeting to discuss how to introduce and describe the evaluation to families. Since Sure Steps program worked with vulnerable families, it was anticipated that the pre-existing relationship of trust between the families and the coaches would enable a free explanation of the evaluation, while clearly conveying to families that Sure Steps was independent form the evaluation process and the family involvement with the Sure Steps program was not dependent on their decision to participate in the evaluation. Coaches emphasised that families could withdraw from the evaluation at any time, that their participation would make no difference to the support provided by the Sure Steps program and that their confidentiality would be maintained at all times.

Sure Steps coaches evaluated families’ competence to take part in the evaluation. If the coach was satisfied that the client understood the demands of the evaluation and was competent to consent, they and the client signed the consent form. This was tested by the coach asking the client to summarise what was involved and their understanding of the evaluation purpose, procedure, confidentiality and reporting of results. When families had reported this information back to coaches in their own words, the coach then asked the participant whether they consented to take part in the study. If the coach was satisfied that the client understood the demands of the research and was competent to consent and participate in the evaluation, they and the client signed the consent form, along with an appropriate witness. While coaches knew who consented to take part in the evaluation, they did not have access to individual parents’ responses collected only for the evaluation purpose.

Sure Steps family Coaches met face-to-face with 36 families who expressed their interest to take part in the program. Of the 36 families who were contacted by Sure Steps Family Coaches, 20 decided to participate in the program (56% participation rate). Ten of those 20 families who took part in the Sure Steps program agreed to participate in the evaluation. Those families who consented to the evaluation were asked for their consent for Sure Steps (a) to share with the evaluator de-identified information about them from the YFS Ltd client and case-management database and (b) to take part in a face-to-face or phone interview.

Table . Number of families who participated in the Sure Steps program and the evaluation

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Number |
| Families contacted by Family Coaches | 36 |
| Families who agreed to participate in the Sure Steps program | 20 |
| Families who agreed to participate in the evaluation of the Sure Steps program | 10 |
| * + Families who shared their de-identified data from the database   + Families who completed the evaluation interview | 10  7 |

Among families who agreed to participate in the evaluation, two were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families and two were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

The mean age of the parents or carers participating in the evaluation was 35 years with an age range between 17 and 65 years. Age was not recorded for one participant taking part in the evaluation. All but one primary caregivers were females. The average age of children of families taking part in the evaluation was 8.3 with an age range between 0 and 20. The mean number of children per family was 4.2 with a range from 1 to 9 children.

Information about the household composition is presented in Table 2. Half of the families were single parents with children, 40% were couples with children and in one case children lived with other family members or relatives.

Table . Household information for the families participating in the evaluation

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Household composition | Number of families |
| Single parent with children | 5 |
| Couple with children | 4 |
| Relatives/family | 1 |

The age range of children in the families taking part in the evaluation is presented in Table 3. Around half of children (52%) belonged to the target group who fit the eligibility criteria for the program (being eight years of age and younger).

Table . Age range of children in the families who participated in the evaluation

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Age range (years) | Number of children |
| 0-2 | 6 |
| 3-5 | 5 |
| 6-8 | 11 |
| 9-11 | 8 |
| 12-14 | 4 |
| 15-17 | 3 |
| 18-20 | 5 |
| Total | 42 |

### Interviews with families

A series of semi-structured either face-to-face or telephone interviews were conducted to understand the implementation and impact of Sure Steps from the perspective of families participating in the program. Families were invited to take part in the evaluation by their Family Coach. Family Coaches explained the evaluation to families using a plain language information sheet prepared by the evaluators, and invited families to participate. Of ten families who consented to take part in the evaluation, seven agreed to be interviewed by evaluators.

### Family case reviews

Sure Steps family case reviews involved extraction and analysis of information from YFS Ltd client and case-management database for a sample of 10 families who agreed to take part in the evaluation. Data provided demographic information about participating families as well as information about type and frequency of contact with families, types of support accessed by families, their housing status, progress toward their goal achievements and family outcomes. YFS provided de-identified data to the evaluators and each family was allocated a unique identification code to aid analysis.

## Interviews with Sure Steps staff and other stakeholders

YFS staff and other stakeholders were invited to take part in interviews/focus groups. An invitation was sent via email that included a brief description of the program, a plain language information sheet and consent form. Eight either face-to-face or telephone interviews and one face-to-face focus group with three participants were conducted (Table 4). These consultations collected information about staff and stakeholders' perceptions of the Sure Steps program, key learnings and suggestions for future improvements and the early impact impacts of the program. The majority of participants were female (82%), all had English as their primary language and none reported being from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.

Table . Summary of stakeholders taking part in the evaluation

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Stakeholders | Number |
| Sure Steps staff | 3 |
| Reference Group | 4 |
| Funder | 3 |
| Referrer | 1 |

# Results

## Engagement and implementation

### What strategies worked well to engage families?

Sure Steps seeks to engage vulnerable families by assisting them to identify and express their family aspirations and then supporting them to reach those objectives. Families lead the program, in the sense that it is families who make an ultimate decision about whether they want to engage with the program and what goals they want to focus on during their participation in the program. Sure Steps entails a strengths-based approach where families are perceived as experts and as such they possess the knowledge of what is best for their families. Great emphasis is placed on building the relationship and rapport between Family Coaches and families, and following the family's own pace and readiness to engage. These aspects of the program were perceived as essential in engaging families in the program, which was reflected in a number of comments recorded during staff and stakeholder interviews, including the following:

"The families really responded well to them knowing what is the best for their family; that’s opened the door straight away – it has been the biggest thing in engaging families. Also, staff being interested in their children - talking to their children, playing with their children, taking interest in what is going on - that has really helped with the engagement" (Staff interview)

"The key is that if focuses on the key family’s priorities rather than on someone else’s priority" (Staff interview)

"I found it to be nonprescriptive ... we work very hard to try do develop a relationship with families first, build rapport with them, build some trust, which case managers do as well, but might not have much time and flexibility...then when the person feels more comfortable, when they are sort of trusting you, then they'll open up a little bit more" (Staff interview)

"Some families because of their history you really need to work slowly to build their trust meeting them where they are at, not trying to set my own agenda but trying where they are at today and trying to engage at that level – trying to build trust and understanding and then taking it from there" (Staff interview)

"Letting people say – we are not ready to engage – in the case management environment that would not be acceptable" (Stakeholder interview)

Families also identified a number of reasons that initially attracted them to the program. Some of them included attending previously another program provided by YFS Ltd and being satisfied with the support received, volunteer nature of the program, getting initial financial support for things that were vital for them, being able to work on a difficulty that was their priority and maintaining their housing security. For example, as some parents stated:

"At the beginning it was financial support that attracted me to the program"

"I was in a particularly desperate situation and I was able to call out .. but was not forced to see [the name of the Family Coach].

"I was a part of [another] program [within YFS] and they linked me with Sure Steps. [Sure Steps] allowed me to get help with the things I want help with ... I can make choices as to what sort of help I need."

"Family security in relation to housing commission ... I wanted to make sure that it is secure for me and my child."

Another strategy that was perceived as helpful during the engagement process was a streamlined referral approach:

" A pretty streamlined approach to referral has really helped - there wasn’t a process where they had to jump through hoops; they met the team directly they were going to work with and decided then whether they wanted to engage or not. (Reference Group interview)

However, the referral process was initially perceived as challenging from the perspective of the Department of Housing, with the view that the referral process could have had a negative effect on the family's engagement with the Sure Steps program, as evidenced by the following remark:

"At the beginning of the program there was a lot of confusion about who would make an initial referral to YFS, would the client call YFS or would we make a referral or would YFS call them - we did go around in a bit in circles sometimes. We would refer someone, someone was keen, we would contact YFS and then they will say, no, get them to contact us. Those little things can sometimes put the client off." (Stakeholder interview)

A further difficulty during this initial stage of engaging families, as indicated by the Department of Housing, involved challenges in 'selling' the program to families. This was proposed to be due to two factors, one related to the Department of Housing not being clear about the Sure Steps program intent, and the other involving the nature of the Department's relationship with the families. For example, one participant stated:

"The start of the program was really difficult because it kind of came quite quickly and we were really not sure on what the whole program was about. So trying to identify our clients that we thought were going to be good matches for the program it was hard to start off, trying to sell something to clients and they are going - what is this all about, is this actually an agenda to take the children off me or are you thinking I cannot manage my children - having those discussions with some people sometimes was difficult" (Stakeholder interview)

### What types of support were provided to families?

Sure Steps offer a range of supports to families taking part in the program. These supports may include - among many other things - advocacy, providing information about child development, providing financial and practical support, safety planning and domestic violence support, linking families with required services, and providing community and cultural connections.

Figure 2 summarises types of support provided to participating families and the frequency of these supports as recorded in the YFS database. This data source indicates that advocacy was the most common support received by Sure Steps families followed by school relationship support and information giving. Further, organising community connections and/or recreational activities, financial/material support, safety planning and domestic violence support and 'other' supports were the next most common ways of supporting Sure Steps families.

Figure 2. Type and frequency of support provided to participating families

Families participating in the evaluation also confirmed they received a variety of supports during their participation in the program and perceived these supports as helpful:

"They helped me with getting my driving licence, getting my youngster a birth certificate ... It was something different each time, we were able to hit the nail on the head each time" (Family interview)

"At the beginning it was financial support. She [family coach] got me all furniture ... that was lovely but the real help and support that was really appreciated was helping me to enrol my son into school, to go to school interviews ... I have a couple of disabilities that prevent me from being able to always understand and communicate. I can communicate but I can't always absorb or attend to what has been said... I can do the interview but I need her there in case I don't understand it all and she was very nonjudgmental and very supportive" (Family interview)

"They [Sure Steps] linked us with paediatrician and helped with a few bills. They’ve linked me in with 123 Magic so I can go and see that course to teach me strategies on parenting." (Family interview)

"They were giving me a lot of understanding about why the kids react the way they do ... when it comes to family resources that has been amazing ... ... the broader our problems become the broader the help becomes which is exactly what we needed." (Family Interview)

Sure Steps employs the ‘wellbeing wheel’ to take into account family strengths and needs in order to identify next steps in helping to support and strengthen families. The ‘wheel’ was developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) in 2010. It is based on the ecological model of child development and includes six wellbeing domains that were identified from best practice models used in the context of child wellbeing and child protection:

• Emotional wellbeing and mental health

• Relationship and sense of belonging

• Family resources

• Learning and development

• Safety

• Physical health

Sure Steps has adopted the domains identified in the wheel, but adapted the implementation of the tool to suit the Sure Steps program design and family profile. The ‘wheel’ is used as an integrated practice and data collection tool. As a result, the ‘wheel’ simultaneously guides a conversation with families and captures information that can be used to measure change.

The frequency of support in relation to the wellbeing wheel's domains received by the families taking part in the evaluation is presented in Figure 3. Emotional wellbeing and family resources were the most frequent areas that required support. These were followed by the learning and development and relationship and sense of belonging domains. Safety and physical health were the least common areas requiring support for the families participating in the evaluation.

Figure 3. Frequency of support provided in relation to the "Wellbeing Wheel"

### What were the critical success factors for the program?

The great majority of participants perceived the Sure Steps program as different from the common case-management support approaches. The most frequently cited differences included:

* The voluntary nature of the program
* Being led by the family's needs and goals and not being prescriptive
* Being flexible in terms of time and scope of the program
* Being strengths-based
* Focusing on the whole family as a unit.

These characteristics were also frequently cited as the critical success factors for the program as expressed in the following interview statements from a number of staff and stakeholders:

"It is voluntary, they [families] don’t have to participate. It does differ from case management in some ways because if they set a plan and they change it in a month's time it’s not that we are going to keep bringing them back to that original plan - nothing is set in stone"

"[Sure Steps] is really about trying to have families in a driver seat. They are directing it from the very beginning which means it can go any which way. Also, it is about that focus on children who are under 8 and trying to make a difference for that next generation coming through; so I think the main aspect is that families from the very beginning are told that this program is about the goals that they wanting to set"

"It does not come with the set agenda so it’s driven by the family’s priorities rather than with something …within the parameter that they need to have a housing issue. It’s not prescriptive as most other programs, where the funding body tells you what tools they have to use, what time frames apply – it is very broad and that allowed it to be directed by the family "(Reference group interview)

"This model is a family coach model ... it is an ecological model - acknowledging that people live in the context of the broader family unit and the community and if you don't provide support for people to engage across of all these levels you don't get those successful outcomes in the medium to long term. The program isn't funded to deal with a clear set of presenting issues ... this enables them to work at the pace that the individuals and families ... is really about identifying their strengths "(Stakeholder interview)

Families who participated in the evaluation largely agreed with the views of staff and stakeholders, most notably reporting they felt they led the process of change and chose what supports were important to them:

"They put you in a driving seat instead of feeling a pressure of someone saying this is what I need you to do. I feel satisfied and accomplished and relieved - you believe that your self-worth is great" (Family interview)

"They helped me with what I needed help with. I can sort of make choices as to what I need help with and they help me do that." (Family Interview)

The families also placed a great value on their relationship with their Family Coaches and perceived the Coaches were genuinely interested in them and their families. As one parent noted:

"This is the first service that really looked at me as a real human being, someone who has feelings and someone who could just have a bad day” (Family interview)

### How did Sure Steps work with the Housing Service Centre for the benefits of participating families?

As noted previously, the Sure Steps program worked only with families living in public housing which impacted on the characteristics of the cohort that Sure Steps was providing support to. Therefore, it is important to note the multilayered relationships between YFS Ltd as the provider of the Sure Steps program and the Department of Housing as the funder of the program. The multiple levels of the way Sure Steps worked with the Housing Service Centre (HSC) are summarised below:

1. Reference Group - member and so involved in the decisions around the development, implementation and evaluation of the service.
2. Engagement at HSC to recruit participating families - the Senior Coach sat with teams to deepen the understanding and prompt referrals.
3. Referral protocol meant that the HSC signed off on all participants to ensure they were aware of who was taking part, and supported the need for each family (please see Attachment E for a detailed description of the Sure Steps referral protocol).
4. Day to day engagement with the HSC for good outcomes. This included the notifying each other when visits from either Department or Sure Steps elicited concerns about the neighbourhood or household members.
5. Monthly reports and regular meeting with the Regional Office to ensure there was a feedback loop throughout implementation and delivery. This enabled the service to stay 'on track' from the point of view of funder and deliverer.

### What activities and strategies made the biggest difference to families?

In regards to strategies and activities received, families valued financial support, support with attending the court and navigating 'the system', having someone to advocate for them and establishing community connections, and receiving information about and being linked with available services. This was reflected in both family and staff interviews:

"[Sure Steps] helped with linking to the paediatrician. They’re going to help me get my licence. I used to always drive but I’ve never had a licence. They have been very helpful with financial support which has really helped me because I struggle financially. (Family interview)

"We’ve got a few families into counselling and I think that has helped and a few children into mental health services so I think just being able to cut through and actually get family into services has made huge changes for the families" (Staff interview)

"The services that they’ve showed us that are available was the most helpful for us. I wouldn’t even know about other services quite frankly. I didn’t even know that the [National Disability Insurance Scheme; NDIS] was coming up. I did not have any idea what the NDIS was and what could offer for my children or myself. I didn’t know that Partners in Recovery existed, didn't know the half of services that they offered." (Family interview)

Several parents who took part in the evaluation also perceived the wellbeing wheel as a very helpful tool to address their needs and make positive changes for the whole family. This is captured in the following parent statement:

"That ['the wheel'] was awesome, we went through that. I really want to work on my daughter and our relationship and being able to work together." (Family interview)

Brokerage was further identified as a valuable means of providing necessary assistance for families, as illustrated in the following comments from interviews with Department of Housing and Sure Steps staff:

"Brokerage is also helpful to our clients because not every program has brokerage attached to it so it’s good that they can look at improving their situation ... it doesn’t have to be huge just something small might help them in the long run" (Stakeholder interview)

"Having the brokerage and the freedom of the brokerage to do with it what the family needs has really been helpful. It’s being used on the whole variety of things and not just a structured set of things. We’ve been able to use it on building rapport with families which has really helped ... even been able to go out for a coffee and take kids out somewhere for fun has opened the door for more conversation and more rich working" (Staff interview)

### Who might this program work best for and in what circumstances?

There was strong agreement amongst. YFS staff that the program works well with younger or first-time parents and with those who are motivated to make changes and improve prospects for themselves and their children. This is demonstrated in the following statement from a staff interview:

"The program is fantastic … [it] would work really well if the right people were being referred to - so that early interventions, the aspirational people that really want to make change but just don’t know how to, they just need that step up and they just need a bit of brokerage or just need help to get into the education or workforce or to see a doctor or a bit of support and then they are on their way … I think this kind of program would just be fantastic and you don’t need that long engagement with them … they’ve got one big wish that they need and we can fulfil that quite quickly and then you just help them put supports in place so they can go off independently. I think it would be fantastic for that kind of cohort and would make a big difference in that generation" (Staff interview)

While Sure Steps staff were prepared to work with families with complex needs, they reported not expecting to encounter as many incidents of high-risk cases of domestic violence. As such, having a small team of workers on the program was identified as a challenge since a number of families required two workers due to significant safety issues. All families that Sure Steps worked with had violence as a current or past factor.

"It’s a bit challenging but there is not enough of us ...it’s very challenging in that the number of families that have got alerts on them require two people so you could nearly spend your whole week with those six families with the two workers in those situations (Interview staff)

"If anyone is sick or we have had absences for other reasons ... it means that the caseload is huge especially with the complex needs. A lot of our families have to have two people visiting" (Staff interview)

Another identified challenge to successful implementation of the program was related to the interaction between the non-prescriptive nature of the Sure Steps program and the cohort of families who participated in Sure Steps. While having the freedom to choose their priorities and goals was regarded as a clear strength of the program's approach for many families, it also presented as a challenge when working with families with complex needs, and especially those who were experiencing domestic and family violence. Such families often had difficulties recognising significant safety issues and risks for themselves and their children and thus did not identify addressing these issues as their priority. Workers required a range of skills to adequately respond to risks while at the same time maintaining their relationship with these high-risk families. At times, the internal conflict experienced by staff in meeting the dual program requirements of being family-driven yet also focused on addressing risks, was clearly evident:

"Parents as experts is fantastic but I think that the cohort that we’ve got at times hasn’t been that good. If the families have really complex needs and we’re putting them as the expert and they don’t have the ability to prioritise parenting, supervision for their children, substance abuse - they are not prioritising that as a need but they are looking at their driving licences and stuff - that’s when it’s really hard (Staff interview)

"One other thing inside [domestic violence] that has been challenging is that (the program) is family lead - but where we can see that parent mightn’t be making the best possible choices or the safety choices – that has been another challenge - how to tackle that so if they don’t identify it and they are just living in crisis and that’s how it has always been and that’s how they function at some capacity … it is really hard to say, well actually no that behaviour is way out of line and you are not safe..." (YFS staff)

"The nature of some of the unknown challenges that we cover and that it might have not been directly in our skill set - like domestic violence and safety - there have been quite a number of families in that situation and that’s been an extra, quite serious challenge ... because that’s outside of our skill set" (Staff interview)

Working with families with complex needs as well as with large families with a number of older children also hindered workers' capacity to focus on the developmental component of the program. This is summarised in the following statements from interviews with Sure Steps staff:

"The level of crises that the families were in was high ... so it was really hard to get past that – one crisis would come, then another one and another one – we weren’t actually ever getting past that and I think that was something really challenging and not what was expected. Again we helped but we didn’t really get to the child development because we were just constantly responding to the crises" (Staff interview)

"There is a family at the moment - the eldest child is 24 and the youngest child is 4 - so this mother has been a mother for 24 years and she already has a lot of experience and a lot of knowledge and a lot of skills. It would be just rude to come in and say I know more than you or my way is better; I didn’t want to feel like a fraud or know it all because this lady has done this for 24 years and seemingly successfully ... I didn’t feel maybe that the child development part would be so relevant for her but with the first time parents or parents with younger children I can really see the benefit of the child development focus because they haven’t had that experience or knowledge of exposure to young kids and generally they are more willing to suck it all in like willing to learn what can I do better or what am I already doing" (Staff interview)

Staff's perception that the developmental aspect of the program might not be as relevant for individuals who had been parents for a long time was congruent with parental views. As one grandparent stated:

"I went into a meeting, everything he was talking about – I’ve been there, done that, cause I’ve raised my three, then I raised my three grandchildren and now I’m raising another three grandchildren there is not much that I haven’t seen or done – I’m pretty set in my ways; when they suggested parenting I said no - been there done that" (Parent interview)

A further challenge included having a short time frame of 12 months to assist families who were taking part in the program to work on their goals, particularly to support families with complex needs and vulnerabilities. As several participants stated:

"Acknowledging that it takes a long time to trust and I think it's unfair to think that this can happen in a 12 month period. (Stakeholder interview)

"When you’ve got only a few months ... and trying to juggle those safety concerns for the children and not wanting to ostracise the parent as well and wanting them to stay engaged - that’s been quite a challenge" (Staff interview)

"I think if the program continued we would absolutely get to that place where we expected to be right at the start but I think our time frame for working hasn’t got us to there yet. Realistically we’ll have 6 to 9 months of engagement and to make long term changes that’s not enough time" (Staff interview)

### How could this program be improved and inform future work with families?

Extending on the feedback described in the previous section regarding the appropriateness of the program content for more experienced parents, the most common suggestion to improve the program effectiveness referred to choosing the right cohort of people who would benefit the most from the supports provided by Sure Steps.

"Maybe the way people are chosen - the younger the better and the earlier the better is probably the bottom line" (Staff interview)

Other suggestions included the possibility of opening the program to other families who could benefit from it. Some perceived the program would be beneficial for families beyond those in the public housing system.

A further area for improvement proposed was to link Sure Steps with other programs in the community to further improve the family's outcomes.

"The program to be scaled up more broadly and the eligibility criteria to disappear ...I think there is a place for this model more broadly and I think everyone should be eligible if you are a parent and living in a context of the community then everyone should be able to access someone who could support them to work across their areas of aspirations." (Stakeholder interview)

"In my opinion from the sustainability point of view, the idea that it's an adjunct to another type of team like Parents Next or Maternal and Child Hub so we are a part of the broader system - I think it would be better" (Reference group interview)

### What was the observed cost effectiveness of the program?

As this evaluation did not directly assess the cost-effectiveness of the Sure Steps program, it would be important that future evaluation include a value for money component. Qualitative data indicated the stakeholders believed it was difficult to demonstrate cost effectiveness of the Sure Steps program due to the short period of time that the program had been operating. As such, an extension of the program for another few years was recommended so that its potential benefits for participating families and children can be followed over time. Nevertheless, it was widely perceived that the money invested in the program produced encouraging outcomes for the families so far, and also provided opportunities to strengthen the links between the Department of Housing and the family support sector.

"I don’t know the financial side of it – even if we get 20% of the families sustaining their tenancy and maybe looking at alternative housing pathways down the track then it’s successful. It's not going to be successful for everyone, we already know that but the money that we have put in and YFS has put in is probably reasonable for the outcomes that they are receiving" (Stakeholder interview)

"Certainly, it has provided us with an opportunity to strengthen our ties with the family services. They are a great organisation working in the Logan community and for that I think this has just been another step where we have been able to raise their profile and let our staff know about the other programs and services delivered through YFS so I think that has been a fantastic element or value for money that Sure Steps has brought" (Stakeholder interview)

## Outcomes

### To what extent was the program helpful in supporting tenancy stability?

Stakeholders reported that some families taking part in the program faced significant tenancy issues. However, there was a perception that the Sure Steps program had started to make differences for some families and contributed to stabilising these. Two examples of how the program has supported tenancy stability were reported during a focus group with the Department of Housing:

"There was a significant tension within the neighbourhood… between two households, and the tenant did make a decision to look up other pathways to more appropriate housing which in turn reduced the negative vibe within the house because of the parents not getting along with one of the neighbours. We know just from the experience that happy families create happy and healthy children so we know that family is in a much better place by having removed themselves from that one to one tension"

"… a far more complex situation where the family was significantly in arrears. Their case was about to progress to QCAT, Queensland Civil Administration Tribunal, and through their joining the [Sure Steps] program they have maintained their repayment agreement that was established with the Office of Public Housing Logan Service Centre, and now have the freedom to understand what their financial commitments are - they are lifting some of that burden of repaying the debts that they are required to repay to the Department but now that’s giving them some space to look at what’s the next opportunity to spend the money and help their kids."

Further, the Department of Housing provided additional information about tenancy stability for the participating families with previously recorded tenancy issues (Table 5). Out of 10 families who took part in the evaluation, three families were new tenants with no prior record regarding tenancy difficulties. Also, information was not provided for one family that moved to private property. The summary indicates that families presented with several housing issues prior to starting Sure Steps. These included receiving breach notices for property condition, notices to leave property, complaints about children’s behaviour and state of property, arrears and maintenance debt. Since starting the Sure Steps program, a number of improvements in housing outcomes were noted for participating families. For example, all families who received breach notices or complaints about property condition prior to their involvement with Sure Steps, had no further issues/complaints since they became involved in the program. Similarly, out of three families with initial difficulties with paying their rent, two had their account in credit and one had no arrears. One family that received a notice to leave due to their arrears, were still in arrears during their involvement with Sure Steps but managed to maintain their tenancy. No changes were noted in relation to maintenance debt.

Table 5. Housing outcomes for participating families with previously noted tenancy issues (n=6)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Tenancy issues prior to starting Sure Steps (n)** | **Outcomes since starting Sure Steps (n)** |
| Breach notices/issues for property condition (4) | No property condition issues or complaints about property condition (4) |
| Arrears (3) | Account in credit (2)  No arrears (1) |
| Arrears – notice to leave (1) | Arrears but maintained tenancy (1) |
| Complaints received regarding children behaviour (1) | No further complaints regarding children’s behaviours (1) |
| Maintenance debt (1) | Maintenance debt (1) |

### What improvements were achieved in parent and child wellbeing?

Sure Steps staff reported some observable changes in relation to parental wellbeing, including improvements in their mental health, daily functioning, social connections and confidence. These are summarised in the following statements:

"I've observed improvements in parents' mental health and their functional capacity to make decisions around their daily life and their children's life. I've observed an increase in building friendships so they are not so isolated. Maybe having the energy to reach out to old friends and trying to connect - so when they feel some other things are under control, they feel they can relax a little bit and might be able to have some leisure time and being able to meet up for a coffee and feel safe in the community." (Staff interview)

"I've seen change in confidence - but it is really hard to measure – I guess in the way a person behaves, talks and presents themselves you can really tell that they are a lot more confident. I’ve noticed a real improvement in one of the mother’s physical appearance ... she just looked relaxed and she just seemed a lot happier and a bit more confident to tackle things that have been on her list ... and feeling a bit more stronger in protecting her family and protecting herself which is really good." (Staff interview)

"Definitely the Paediatrician appointments, getting them to see doctors and that long term sustainability with that I think that has been a massive change." (Staff interview)

In addition, improvements in family wellbeing were also measured via the wellbeing 'wheel'. A series of figures below present data on the six wellbeing domains for the families taking part in the evaluation during their first and last recorded assessment. The ratings were conducted by Families Coaches. Data was grouped into three categories: 'challenge' (significant and moderate challenge combined), 'adequate', and 'strength' (significant and moderate strength combined). Overall, the results suggest changes in ratings across all domains, whereby families moved from presenting with 'challenges' in a particular domain to be observed to function at an 'adequate' level, or even to display' strength' in that same domain. Data were missing for two families at the last assessment as they were in the early phase of their involvement with Sure Steps and did not have their review conducted during the program evaluation timeframe.

Figure 4 summarises data related to changes in the Mental Health and Wellbeing domain. At the first assessment, this domain presented a 'challenge' for 80% of families taking part in the evaluation compared to 50% recorded in the last evaluation. Twenty percent of families in this evaluation were rated as having an 'adequate' mental health and emotional wellbeing. While no participating families were rated as having a 'strength' in this domain at the first assessment, for 20% of families the Mental Health and Wellbeing domain was rated as a 'strength' at the last assessment.

Figure 4. Changes in the Mental Health and Wellbeing domain

At the initial assessment, the Sense of Belonging domain (Figure 5) presented a 'challenge' for 90% of families taking part in the evaluation. For further 10% of participating families, this domain was rated in the 'adequate' category. During their last assessment point, 50% presented with 'challenges' in this area, 20% were 'adequately' meeting this need, and 10% were identified as having a 'strength' in this domain.

Figure 5. Changes in the Sense of Belonging domain from first to last assessment

Nine families had their information recorded regarding the Family Resources domain (Figure 6) during their first assessment. This area was identified as a 'challenge' for 90% of participating families at the first assessment point compared to 70% at the last assessment. Ten percent of participating families had 'adequate' family resources during their last assessment compared to none in the initial assessment. No families were identified as having a 'strength' in this domain either at the first or the last assessment.

Figure 6. Changes in the Family Resources domain from first to last assessment

Figure 7 presents changes in the Learning and Developmental domain from the initial to the last assessment for families taking part in the evaluation. This area was rated as a 'challenge' for 80% of families in their first assessment which reduced to 50% in their last assessment. While one family was rated in the 'adequate' category at their first assessment, no families were rated in this category at the last assessment. The Learning and Development area was identified as a 'strength' for 40% of participating families in their last assessment in comparison to only 10% at their initial assessment.

Figure 7. Changes in the Learning and Development domain from first to last assessment

The Safety domain (Figure 8) presented a 'challenge' for 60% of families participating in the evaluation. This has reduced to 30% at the last assessment. Safety was rated as 'adequate' for 20% of families at their first assessment which increased to 40% at their last review. No changes were recorded in the 'strength' category with this domain presenting as a 'strength' one family at both assessment points.

Figure 8. Changes in the Safety domain from first to last assessment

Changes in the Physical Health domain are presented in Figure 9. Physical Health was identified as a 'challenge' for 60% of participating families at the initial assessment compared to 20% at the last review point. There was an increase in the 'adequate' category from 20% of families during their first assessment to 40% during the last assessment. No changes in the 'strength' category were observed

Figure 9. Changes in the Physical Health domain from first to last assessment

### To what extent did families achieve their goals?

While taking part in the Sure Steps program, families identified a number of goals they wanted to address to improve the future for themselves and their children.

Identified goals were recorded in the YFS Ltd clinical and case-management database and subsequently rated on a scale from 1 (goal not achieved) to 5 (goal fully achieved) upon review.

Figure 10 summaries the progress of families participating in the evaluation toward achieving their established goals. The results suggest that almost 50% of recorded goals were either fully or mostly achieved. Sixteen percent of goals were partially achieved while 12% were slightly achieved. Twenty-four percent of goals had not been achieved by the time the evaluation was conducted.

Figure 10. Family goal achievement

While the potential for parents to respond in what they viewed as socially desirable ways must be taken into account, interviews with families suggested very positive views about their progress towards the goals they established. As indicated by one parent:

"Everything has been achieved that we said we wanted to achieve; we are still working on things which is fine with us, but everything we had attention on to sort of get it done, it was done 100%" (Family interview)

### To what extent did the program assist in improving parental confidence and sense of control?

During family interviews respondents were asked to rate on a scale from zero (no control at all) to five (complete control) how much control they believed they had over what they wanted to do in the program. All families who took part in the evaluation reported that they had a complete control. As several parents indicated:

"I was absolutely in control. She gave me a little bit of direction and she suggested some things. It was my choice and it was good."

"We are in a driving seat ... feeling satisfied, accomplished, relieved... helps with self-worth"

"We were allowed to set standards rather than the standards being set for us, this was the biggest deal because it sort of gives you that progression you want to move forward when you are the person setting the standards."

"It just has been more content now, everything is more relaxed there is no constant worry about things, so everything is sort of calm and collected."

### Family satisfaction with the program

All families who participated in the interviews expressed very high levels of satisfaction with the Sure Steps program. As several parents remarked during the interviews:

"I enjoy it, I really enjoy it. I've found it helpful across the board and not just with parenting side of things...This is perfect for us"

"I often recommend it (Sure Steps) to friends because it's like having someone to advocate for you. I'm really lucky to have a wonderful support worker, I think they cover everything"

"I think it’s the best thing I ever did ... Getting support from this program has been awesome and finally someone is doing something for him [the child] and me."

"Sure Steps is the only program we have joined that we are happy with."

Notwithstanding limitations associated with possible selection bias (workers nominating when the tool was administered), social desirability bias and potential ceiling effect demonstrated by invariability in responses, data collected using the Session Rating Scale suggests high levels of family satisfaction with the program. For the three parents who completed the Session Rating Scale during one of the sessions with their Family Coach, each parent gave the highest possible ratings on each of the four statements, suggesting they completely:

* felt heard, understood and respected
* believed they worked on the goals and talked about topics that were important for them,
* agreed that their Family Coach's approach was a good fit for them, and
* felt the session was right for their needs.

# Discussion

## Summary of findings

In this summary of findings, we briefly address the key findings related to the evaluation questions. The summary is based on data collected in the six-month period, from September 2017 to March 2018, and pertains to the early stages of Sure Steps development and implementation.

Qualitative data revealed that Sure Steps used a number of innovative strategies that likely facilitated family engagement with the program:

* Putting families in the 'driver's seat' and allowing them to choose program goals
* The focus on building strong worker-family relationships and rapport
* Adopting a strengths-based approach
* Adopting an aspirational focus and
* Seeing families as experts.

There was an agreement among the evaluation participants that the above were important elements of the Sure Steps model during the engagement phase. These findings are consistent with the program's assumptions suggesting that facilitated identification of parental aspirations for their families, supportive relationships with Family Coaches and the validation of parents as experts for their family needs, can lead to greater engagement and participation in the program.

Participants generally agreed that the following factors were critical in the program achieving positive changes for participating families:

* The voluntary nature of the program whereby a decision whether to take part in the program rests entirely on the family
* The nonprescriptive aspect of the program, with families making the ultimate decision about their priorities, goals and aspirations
* Flexibility of the program in terms of the worker's availability
* The program's strengths-based approach
* The program's strong emphasis on building relationships and rapport with families.

As a short-term pilot, the Sure Steps program investigated new ways of working with families living in public housing who had a child under the age of eight years. It was assumed that families would engage better with Family Coaches around understanding and creating environments for their children to thrive, if they had the stable housing through their public tenancy. However, the feedback received during the evaluation indicated that the stability of housing was an important but not the only factor that impacted on the Family Coach's ability to focus on and implement the child development aspect of the program in order to instil changes in the family environments that would subsequently impact on their children's future. A number of other significant issues, such as domestic and family violence, often needed to be addressed immediately and took a priority over the developmental component of the program. In addition, these significant issues in some cases posed a threat to tenancy stability of the families, although no participating families were evicted during the course of the evaluative window. This was further limited by the running time of the Sure Steps program at the time of the evaluation, as many families may need longer to address these significant issues before they would able to focus on the developmental component of the program. It was also perceived by some informants that the program's emphasis on the child's development might not have been the best fit for individuals who have been parents for a longer time and have older children.

Nevertheless, the Sure Steps program was unanimously evaluated positively and perceived, overall, to be helpful for all participating families. While the program was believed to produce relatively quick and greater changes for younger or first-time parents and those who were motivated to work on their family's aspirations, other families with many complex needs still benefited from Sure Steps but achieved the benefits at a slower pace.

This has raised a question about the need to re-examine the program components in light of the early evaluation findings and/or to consider what types of families would be the best match for the program. Consequently, the most commonly reported suggestion to improve the program effectiveness referred to choosing the right cohort of people who would benefit the most from the supports provided by Sure Steps. Further suggestions included the possibility of extending the program to other families who could benefit from it, as well as linking it with other programs in the community to further improve the family's outcomes.

Further, length of service will be a focus for practice development for the next phase. There was a built-in end of the coaching relationship with families with the one-year contact, and family review meetings focussed on:

1. What the family had identified as a goal
2. What progress had been made so far
3. What a good ending with Sure Steps will look like with the family,

Feedback from the Coaches indicated that this continues to be helpful for them when working and reviewing plans with families. Up to one year, but minimum of a few weeks if families identify a specific target, has been the general parameter for a time frame of engagement with Sure Steps, and mirrors that of the YFS Step By Step (secondary family support - case management model) team that has been found to be effective. Learnings from case management approaches with families at YFS has emphasised the need for a clear timeline and expectations for engagement, to ensure progress with goals is timely and focussed.

Sure Steps provided a wide range of supports for families. The most common types of support included advocacy, school relationships support, and providing information to families. This was followed by organising community connections and/or recreational activities, financial/material support, safety planning, domestic violence support and 'other' types of support. The least common supports listed in the YFS Ltd client and case-management database were health therapies, referrals to interpreters[[1]](#footnote-2) and providing employment program support. The provision of in-home support focusing on parenting skills and home skills development was not common, although the provision of information about child development was common. Further, program supports were classified against six wellbeing domains. Supports for mental health and emotional wellbeing and for family resources were the most common. The least common domains included safety and physical health. These results corresponded with the families' views about what types of supports were most helpful for them. Participating families frequently endorsed financial support, advocacy, receiving information about and being linked with services and communities and receiving support with court attendance and school relationships as activities and strategies that made the biggest difference for them. The families also identified using the wellbeing 'wheel' as a useful tool to address their needs and plan for their family future. However, some discrepancies in opinion were noted in relation to supports that were needed regarding safety issues. While interviews with Sure Steps staff members indicated that an unexpectedly high number of families with frequent and severe domestic and family violence issues participated in the program, this area was not flagged in the family interviews. It could be the case that their long-term difficulties, mental health issues or substance abuse impacted on their ability to identify safety as a priority goal. Another possible reason could be attributed to families lacking confidence and insight to identify domestic and family violence issues.

Also, the Sure Steps team noted that families experiencing high risk domestic violence were not as reflected in the evaluation group as the participants as a whole. It is important to note that the Sure Steps team provided significant time in supporting families experiencing domestic and family violence with police, domestic violence services and court. Thus, an important item for future evaluation could be to further explore the value that families put to this support, to progress why this investment was not reflected in family interviews.

In addition, the Sure Steps team identified recruitment and training needs as significant factors to ensure an appropriate response to address complexities and risk likely to be inherent for participating families in future iteration of the program. Working with up to 20 families with a team of two FTE made supporting home visits with two people (for example, for safety reasons) more challenging. YFS reports plans to look at students, volunteers and other means to reduce the impact on Coach time.

The families taking part in the evaluation believed that the program was very helpful for them and expressed a very high satisfaction level with the Family Coaches. The reported improvements included:

* becoming more independent
* being more aware of what services and supports were available in the community
* increased understanding of parenting, and
* becoming increasingly skilled in dealing with children's challenging behaviours.

Families also reported starting to think more about and making plans for their future. Participating families also emphasised that they felt understood and respected and agreed that their Family Coach's approach was a good fit for them.

Sure Steps staff also reported some observable changes in relation to parental wellbeing, including improvements in their mental health, daily functioning, social connections and confidence. The evaluation interviews with the representatives of the Department of Housing indicated that the Sure Steps program also made some differences by assisting families to stabilise their tenancy issues, such as addressing their tenancy arrears or moving to a more appropriate accommodation. Additional changes were recorded regarding the six wellbeing domains, as measured by the wellbeing 'wheel', including mental health and emotional wellbeing, sense of belonging, learning and development, safety, family resources, and physical health. The results indicated that families moved from experiencing challenges in a particular domain at their first assessment to functioning adequately or even experiencing strengths in the same domain at the subsequent assessment. While often these changes were small and a limited number of families exhibited strengths on the domains in their final assessment, all changes were made in positive directions. These results are important due to the complexity of families that Sure Steps worked with and limited time applied to address their presenting concerns at the time of the evaluation.

The scope of the evaluation did not include a cost-benefit analysis of the Sure Steps program. Thus, it is recommended that future evaluation contain a value for money component. However, we can draw on the views of evaluation participants about the likely value of the program

Participants reported that cost effectiveness of the Sure Steps program was difficult to demonstrate in the short period of time that the program had been operating. As such, an extension of the program for another few years was suggested so that its benefits for participating families could be followed over time. Nevertheless, as indicated in interviews with stakeholders, it was perceived that the money invested in the program produced reasonable and positive outcomes for the families so far and also provided an opportunity to strengthen the links between the Department of Housing and family services.

## Implications

**Recommendation 1: Consider clearly defining the program components/or re-examine the program logic in light of the early evaluation findings**

As Sure Steps was a pilot study, it was testing the elements of the program that could work well for participating families. As some elements, such as focus on the child development, were not comprehensively addressed with all participating families, it might be beneficial to re-examine the program components and/or the program logic in light of the early evaluation findings.

**Recommendation 2: Consider testing and replicating the model with different target populations**

While the Sure Steps program produced beneficial results for all participating families, there were some opposing views as to who the program is best suited for. Some participants suggested scaling up the program and removing the eligibility criteria, while others believed that it might be better to use it with younger and first-time parents who showed the greatest improvements during the program's early implementation phase. Thus, it might be beneficial to replicate and evaluate the program with different cohorts in the future to identify any differences in the effectiveness of the program.

**Recommendation 3: Consider linking the program with another community program**

Due to the small size of the team, and the variety of presenting family concerns such as significant domestic and family violence and intergenerational trauma, it might be beneficial to link Sure Steps with another program in the community so that the staff can be better supported and the program can be managed and delivered more efficiently.

**Recommendation 4: Consider an extension of the program to allow for a follow up of participants to further determine the program’s long-term effects for families and their children**

This report reflects preliminary support for the positive early impact of the Sure Steps program that was achieved in a short eight-month period. While all participants agreed on the benefits for vulnerable and complex-needs families during the program's early implementation, it would be beneficial to investigate whether these initial benefits had been maintained over a longer period of time. Therefore, an extension of the program, to allow for following up parents and their children should be considered. Any program extension should also have an evaluative component to build upon the findings of this report. It is recommended that, from the point of engagement, all families participating in the program consent to the use of de-identified information for evaluation purposes.

**Recommendation 5: Consider a longer intervention period to allow for the time needed for engagement/rapport**

Sure Steps program provides support for vulnerable and complex-need families, who often present with trust issues and difficulties sustaining their involvement with services. As working with these families requires a very sensitive approach that matches their learning pace, a longer intervention period might be beneficial to be able to engage these families, earn their trust and assist them in addressing their deeper concerns.

**Recommendation 6: Consider having a larger team of workers**

Having a small number of Family Coaches was perceived as both a benefit and barrier to the program implementation. The small team worked well together and workers complemented each other with their unique set of skills. However, in light of many families experiencing significant domestic and family violence which required support from two workers at a time, it was difficult to attend to all families in a timely manner. Depending on the course that the program takes, having a larger team might be considered if the program continues to work with vulnerable families with many complex needs and severe safety issues.

**Recommendation 7: Consider how the program can align better with funder priorities and procurement processes**

The results suggested the source of the funding focussed the program cohort in a particular way.

For example, contract negotiations between the provider and the funder settled a number of issues:

* The funder required the Sure Steps program to work with families with children from zero to eight years of age and did not take up the provider’s suggestion to focus on the first 1000 days. This led to families with older children participating.
* Requirements that families needed to be exhibiting early signs of tenancy difficulty may have added to the complexity of referred families, but there is no evidence it prevented interested families from being accepted into the program and, in fact, could have further motivated families to join the program.
* A request to delay the start of the program delivery to allow a ‘ramp up’ period was not reinforced by the funder, leading to low numbers until operational set up and community awareness led to successful referrals a few months after the program commencement.
* Family Coaching support was limited to families who were in the public housing system. As some families decided to move to the private rental market during their involvement with Sure Steps, this terminated their eligibility to continue taking part and receiving supports form the program. This might have been detrimental to those families, as Sure Steps was often the only support they were willing to receive or the only support available to them.

Therefore, it might be beneficial to consider strategies to better align the program with priorities of the funder and procurement processes.

**Recommendation 8: Consider whether there are circumstances when Family Coaching is an inadequate response for participating families**

Family Coaches encountered many instances of working with families who experienced more frequent and more severe levels of domestic and family violence than initially anticipated. This has raised safety concerns and subsequent notifications to the Department of Child Safety. While the program's underlying philosophy is to allow families to lead the program and decide on their aspirations, these safety concerns have raised questions within the team about whether there is an inflated view of the Sure Steps service as a protective factor by the child protection system for families vulnerable to child harm. Whilst Sure Steps worked collaboratively with other services to address risk that the families perceived (see Figure 2), when the team made notifications to Child Safety, this did not always result in an offer of more intensive support from elsewhere. This gap in addressing the perceived needs of families should remain an ongoing practice consideration for the Sure Steps approach, to ensure the Coaches operate within their sphere of competency and capability.

## Conclusions and limitations

It appears the Sure Steps program was implemented as intended and employed all of its essential components in practice. The program was perceived positively by a range of stakeholders including participating families, Sure Steps staff, members of the Reference Group, referrers and the program funder. The great majority of participants agreed that its core aspects of being aspirationally focused, flexible and directed at the family as a unit produced positive changes for the participating families and great satisfaction with the program.

We note several limitations of the evaluation. These include the small number of families who agreed to participate in the evaluation, which limited conclusions about the generalisability of findings. To address this limitation, YFS Ltd plans that future iterations of the program should notify families upon engagement that their de-identified information and feedback will be provided to evaluators, and a consent form signed to this effect from the beginning of the service. Further, there was an overwhelmingly positive appraisal of the Sure Steps program by the participating families. It may be that only families who felt more positive about discussing their experiences or who had better outcomes from the program agreed to participate, compared with those who might have been less satisfied with the program. This report also strongly relied on qualitative data and thus on attributions made by families, staff and other stakeholders who participated in the consultations. As this was not a controlled trial of outcomes, it is difficult to be certain about the attribution of our findings. Nevertheless, there was strong agreement in the data collected through the interviews and case reviews, which adds support to the outcomes identified in this report.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the current evaluation, the promise of the Sure Steps program is clear. In this early stage of program installation, the evidence outlined in this report attest to the value of the program for families at risk of tenancy loss in addition to other risks strongly associated with child vulnerability. The growing body of evidence emerging from the literature on the implementation of programs in child and family support indicates that high quality implementation is a process, not an event. This process is often cited to be a long one, with most programs of the nature of Sure Steps needing between two and four years to progress through the stages of installation, early implementation, full implementation and sustainability (Mildon & Shlonsky, 2011). Therefore, the promise of Sure Steps that is demonstrated through the current evaluation, should continue to be built upon to further influence intergenerational outcomes for society's most vulnerable children and families.

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1. Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Information Sheet and Consent Form for YFS Staff

YFS Staff

Information Sheet

Project Title: Evaluation of the Sure Steps program

Researchers: Dr Catherine Wade [cwade@parentingrc.org.au](mailto:cwade@parentingrc.org.au)

Dr Elbina Avdagic [eavdagic@parentingrc.org.au](mailto:eavdagic@parentingrc.org.au)

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project.

The following pages provide information about the project, to help you decide if you would like to take part in this research. Please read this information carefully. You may ask questions about anything you don’t understand or want to know more about.

Participation is voluntary. If you don’t wish to take part, you don’t have to. If you begin participating, you can stop at any time.

What is this research about?

The Parenting Research Centre (PRC) is conducting this evaluation on behalf of YFS Logan. The aim is to learn more about Sure Steps program implementation and how to best reach and support vulnerable families through testing an innovative model of engagement and service delivery.

The research has been approved by the Parenting Research Centre Human Research Ethics Committee (Melbourne).

What will I be asked to do?

Your involvement will require you to fill in a brief questionnaire about yourself (i.e., your current role, number of years working in this role, education level), and participation in a focus group or a telephone interview that will take one to two hours.

During the interview/focus group, you will be asked questions about your experiences and perceptions of the implementation and impact of the Sure Steps program.

With your consent, the interview/focus group will be audiotaped to help record information you provided to assist with future analysis. You may choose to select a pseudonym if you wish for the purpose of interviews/focus groups.

What are the possible benefits?

Findings from this evaluation may:

Determine how well the Sure Steps program is working and what changes may be needed

Determine what factors influence the implementation processes and outcomes

Identify service system improvements and opportunities that can assist vulnerable families achieve their goals

What are the possible risks?

We do not expect that there will be any risk of harm or discomfort. It is anticipated that staff will generally feel comfortable discussing their experiences of the Sure Steps program. However, if you experience any discomfort as a result of consultations, you are encouraged to contact either Dr Catherine Wade ph: (03) 8660 3514 or Dr Elbina Avdagic, ph: 0418 555 443. Alternatively, you may wish to contact the employee assistance service for your agency or Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Confidentiality

All data relating to you will be de-identified prior to being used for any analyses. This means that the research team will not be able to determine who the data was collected from when running their analyses. Findings from interviews or focus groups will be summarised and reported at a group level to further protect your identity.

No other organisations will have access to the information you give us and your involvement in this evaluation will not affect your ongoing employment in any way.

What will we do with the information you give us?

We will store the information you give us on a secure location on a server to which only members of the research team have access. Information obtained through focus groups/interviews will be used as the basis for a report that is provided to YFS Logan to better understand the implementation and impacts of the Sure Steps program. This report will not contain information that identifies you.

Only staff involved in this research will have access this information. All original demographic questionnaires and audio tapes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at the Parenting Research Centre for 5 years after which this data will be destroyed.

Do I have to take part?

If you don’t want to take part in the evaluation process you don’t have too. You may decide to retract consent at any stage prior to participating without explanation and this will not affect your involvement with YFS or employment in any way. Information provided by you during group discussions will not be able to be removed because it cannot be identified.

Will I hear about the results of this project?

If you would like to know the results of the project, you can contact the research team via ph: (03) 8660 3500 and we will send you a summary.

Contact us

You should feel free to ask questions at any time. If you have any questions about this project, please contact Dr Elbina Avdagic at the Parenting Research Centre on 0418 555 443.

For complaints about the research project

If you have a complaint or concern about the conduct of this research project, please contact the Chair of the Parenting Research Centre Ethics Committee on (03) 8660 3500.

Consent Form

Project Title: Evaluation of the Sure Steps Program

Researchers: Dr Catherine Wade [cwade@parentingrc.org.au](mailto:cwade@parentingrc.org.au)

Dr Elbina Avdagic [eavdagic@parentingrc.org.au](mailto:eavdagic@parentingrc.org.au)

Consent Statement: I am voluntarily making a decision to participate and share information collected from me in an interview/focus group with the PRC research team. My signature indicates that:

I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep

I understand that the purpose of this research is to learn more about the implementation of the Sure Steps program and any early outcomes associated with the program

I understand that my participation in this evaluation is for research purposes only, and that being part of this evaluation will not affect my employment in any way

I acknowledge that the possible effects of participating in this research project have been explained to my satisfaction

For the evaluation, I will be required to participate in a telephone interview /focus group that will be audio recorded

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to retract consent at any stage prior to participating in group discussions without explanation or prejudice

I understand that the data from this research will be collected, processed and stored at the Parenting Research Centre following completion of the study. It will be destroyed after 5 years

I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements; my data will be completely anonymous and accessible only by the named researchers

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Information Sheet and Consent Form for Stakeholders

Stakeholders

Information Sheet

Project Title: Evaluation of the Sure Steps Program

Researchers: Dr Catherine Wade [cwade@parentingrc.org.au](mailto:cwade@parentingrc.org.au)

Dr Elbina Avdagic [eavdagic@parentingrc.org.au](mailto:eavdagic@parentingrc.org.au)

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project.

The following pages provide information about the project, to help you decide if you would like to take part in this evaluation. Please read this information carefully. You may ask questions about anything you don’t understand or want to know more about.

Participation is voluntary. If you don’t wish to take part, you don’t have to. If you begin participating, you can stop at any time.

What is this research about?

This evaluation is being conducted by the Parenting Research Centre (PRC) on behalf of YFS Logan. The aim is to learn more about the implementation of the Sure Steps program and to learn how to best reach and support vulnerable families through testing an innovative model of engagement and service delivery.

The research has been approved by the Parenting Research Centre Human Research Ethics Committee (Melbourne).

What will I be asked to do?

Involvement in the project will require the completion of a brief demographic questionnaire about yourself (i.e., your current role, number of years working in this role, education level), and participation in a focus group or a telephone interview that will take one to two hours.

During the interview/focus group, you will be asked questions about your perceptions of the implementation and impact of the Sure Steps program, as well as your future recommendations for the program.

With your consent, the interview/focus group will be audiotaped to help record information you provided to assist with future analysis. You may choose to select a pseudonym if you wish for the purpose of interviews/focus groups.

What are the possible benefits?

Findings from this evaluation may:

Determine how well the Sure Steps program is working and what changes may be needed

Determine what factors influence the implementation processes and outcomes

Identify service system improvements and opportunities that can assist vulnerable families achieve their goals

What are the possible risks?

We do not expect that there will be any risk of harm or discomfort associated with your participation in this project.

Confidentiality

All data relating to you will be de-identified prior to being used for any analyses. This means that the research team will not be able to determine who the data were collected from. Findings from interviews or focus groups will be summarised and reported at a group level to further protect your identity.

No other organisations will have access to the information you give us and your involvement in this evaluation will not affect your ongoing employment in any way.

What will we do with the information you give us?

We will store the information you give us on a secure location on a server to which only members of the research team have access. Information obtained through focus groups/interviews will be used as the basis for a report that is provided to YFS Logan to better understand the implementation and impacts of the Sure Steps program. This report will not contain information that identifies you.

Only members of the research team will have access to this information. All original demographic questionnaires and audio recordings will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at the Parenting Research Centre for 5 years after which these data will be destroyed.

Do I have to take part?

If you don’t want to take part in the evaluation process you don’t have too. You may decide to retract consent at any stage prior to participating without explanation and this will not affect your involvement with YFS or employment in any way. Information provided by you during group discussions will not be able to be removed from our database or analyses because it cannot be identified.

Will I hear about the results of this project?

If you would like to know the results of the project, you can contact the research team via ph: (03) 8660 3500 and we will send you a summary.

Contact us

You should feel free to ask questions at any time. If you have any questions about this project, please contact Dr Catherine Wade at the Parenting Research Centre on (03) 8660 3500.

For complaints about the research project

If you have a complaint or concern about the conduct of this research project, please contact the Chair of the Parenting Research Centre Ethics Committee on (03) 8660 3500.

Consent Form

Project Title: Evaluation of the Sure Steps Program

Researchers: Dr Catherine Wade [cwade@parentingrc.org.au](mailto:cwade@parentingrc.org.au)

Dr Elbina Avdagic [eavdagic@parentingrc.org.au](mailto:eavdagic@parentingrc.org.au)

Consent Statement: I am voluntarily making a decision to participate and share information collected from me in an interview/focus group with the Parenting Research Centre research team. My signature indicates that:

I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep

I understand that the purpose of this research is to learn more about the implementation of the Sure Steps program and any early outcomes associated with the program

I understand that my participation in this evaluation is for research purposes only, and that being part of this evaluation will not affect my employment in any way

I acknowledge that the possible effects of participating in this research project have been explained to my satisfaction

For the evaluation, I will be required to participate in a telephone interview /focus group that will be audio recorded

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to retract consent at any stage prior to participating in group discussions without explanation or prejudice

I understand that the data from this research will be collected, processed and stored at the Parenting Research Centre following completion of the study. It will be destroyed after 5 years

I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements; my data will be completely anonymous and accessible only by the named researchers

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Information Sheet and Consent Form for Parents

Parent or Carer

Information Sheet

Project Title: Evaluation of the Sure Steps Program

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Researchers: | Dr Catherine Wade | [cwade@parentingrc.org.au](mailto:cwade@parentingrc.org.au) |
|  | Dr Elbina Avdagic | [eavdagic@parentingrc.org.au](mailto:eavdagic@parentingrc.org.au) |

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research project.

The following pages have information about the project to help you decide if you would like to take part in this evaluation. You may ask questions about anything you don’t understand or want to know more about.

Participation is voluntary. If you don’t wish to take part, you don’t have to. If you begin participating, you can stop at any time.

What is this research about?

Staff at the Parenting Research Centre is conducting the evaluation. The project is funded by YFS Logan. The aim is to evaluate the delivery of the Sure Steps program. This means that we are trying to understand how helpful the program is and how to make it better for other families in the future. This research has been approved by the Parenting Research Centre (PRC) Ethics Committee.

What will I be asked to do?

We will ask you to:

Complete a short questionnaire (4 questions) each time your family coach visits you at home.

Complete a short questionnaire (8 questions) that will be given to you by your family coach at the completion of the program.

Take part in either a telephone or face-to-face interview conducted by the evaluation team. The interview will take between 30 and 60 minutes and will take place after you complete the Sure Steps program. With your consent, the interview will be audiotaped to record information you provided to assist with future analysis. You may choose to use a false name if you wish for the purpose of interview.

With your permission, we will also check some information collected by the Sure Steps program regarding types of support you access through the program and how helpful the service was for you and your family. We will also access data about your current tenancy (e.g., how long you have lived at the property, if there have been any difficulties with the tenancy).

What are the possible benefits?

Findings from this evaluation may:

Determine how well the Sure Steps program worked for you and what changes may be needed in the program so that it can be more helpful for families in the future

Assist in improving the program for other families

What are the possible risks?

There is a minimal risk of discomfort to participating families associated with the evaluation. If talking about your experience with the Sure Steps program makes you feel upset, or you have any other concerns about participating, you are welcome to call our psychologists, Dr Catherine Wade ph: (03) 8660 3514 or Dr Elbina Avdagic, ph: 0418 555 443 who can help you find a local support such as a GP or family support worker. Alternatively you may wish to call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Confidentiality

All data relating to you will be de-identified prior to being used for any analyses. This means that the research team will not be able to determine who the data was collected from when running their analyses. Findings from interviews will be summarised and reported at a group level to further protect your identity. You will not be identified in the report we write for YFS Logan.

No other organisations will have access to the information you give us and your involvement in this evaluation will not affect your ongoing involvement with Sure Steps in any way.

Even if you agree to participate and share your data with us you are free to change your mind and withdraw your consent at any time. You will still continue to receive the Sure Steps service just the same. If you choose to withdraw from the evaluation, it will not affect any services you may receive.

Limits to Confidentiality

All data collected for this study will be confidential, however there are some important exceptions to confidentiality. If we are worried that you or your children are at risk of significant harm, we will have to disclose your personal information to an appropriate authority with or without your consent, to ensure your safety and safety of your children.

What will happen to my information?

All data from or about you that is shared with the PRC will be de-identified. During the research period, your consent form and questionnaire data will be stored separately in a locked cupboard at the Parenting Research Centre. Only the Parenting Research Centre Sure Steps Project Team will have access to this information. Only group data will be used in reports and publications relating to the project. After a period of 5 years, all data will be destroyed.

Do I have to take part?

If you don’t want to take part in the interviews you don’t have to. You may decide to withdraw from the study at any stage without explanation and this will not affect your involvement with Sure Steps in any way.

Who can I contact?

If you want any further information about this research you can contact Dr Catherine Wade or Dr Elbina Avdagic via phone: (03) 8660 3500

For complaints about the project:

If you have any complaints about any aspect of the project, the way it is being conducted or any questions about being a participant in general, then you may contact the Parenting Research Centre Ethics Committee, (03) 8660 3500.

Parent or Carer Consent Form

Project Title: Sure Steps Program

Project Title: Evaluation of the Sure Steps Program

Researchers: Dr Catherine Wade [cwade@parentingrc.org.au](mailto:cwade@parentingrc.org.au)

Dr Elbina Avdagic [eavdagic@parentingrc.org.au](mailto:eavdagic@parentingrc.org.au)

Consent Statement: I am voluntarily making a decision to share information routinely collected from my family coach or from me with the Parenting Research Centre, to complete brief questionnaires and to take part in a telephone interview. My signature indicates that:

|  |
| --- |
| I understand the information about my participation in the research project, which has been provided to me by the researchers. |
| I understand that no identifying information will be disclosed or published. |
| I understand that any information that may identify me will be removed at the time of analysis of any data. |
| I understand that my participation is voluntary and I understand that I can cease my participation at any time. |
| I understand that my participation in this research will be treated with confidentiality. |
| I agree to take part in the Parenting Research Centre’s (PRC) research project specified above. |

Participant signature

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

🞏 Please tick this box and provide your email or mail address if you wish to receive feedback about the research: …………………………………………………………………………………

Witness signature

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Family Interview Schedule

Sure Steps Families Interview Schedule

Evaluation of the Sure Steps Program

Semi Structured Interview Introduction

Parenting Research Centre is conducting the evaluation of the Sure Steps program on behalf of YFS Logan. We would like to know more about what families think about Sure Steps. We are interested in things like how your needs were met, how helpful the service was and any suggestions about how the program could be improved.

We are conducting interviews aimed at learning more about experiences of families who participated in the Sure Steps program and we really value the feedback from people who actually used the service. It’s your chance to have a say about supports you received. Please be aware that although your experience and feedback on the Sure Steps program is extremely valuable to us, you are not obliged to participate in this interview.

The interview will take between 30 and 60 minutes and will be audio-recorded with your permission. You may choose to use a false name if you wish for the purpose of interview.

Findings from interviews will be summarised and reported and a group level to further protect your identity. You will not be identified in the report we write for YFS Logan.

We believe it is important to include the lived experiences of families in the evaluation of the Sure Steps program. The feedback from these interviews will help Sure Steps improve their support for other families.

Do you have any questions?

Semi Structured Interview

* How did you find out about the Sure Steps program?
* How long did you stay with the Sure Steps program?
* What did you think about the program?
* What initially appealed to you about the program?
  + Was this program different to any other support you have received in the past?
  + If yes, what was different?
* What support/help did you get from Sure Steps?
  + To what extent was their support useful to your needs?
* What parts of the ‘wheel’ did you identify as important to you?
* What services (if any) were you linked in while working with the Sure Steps program?
  + Do you think you would have been able to access these services if you were not working with Sure Steps?
* How much say did you have in setting your goals? (On a scale from 0 to 5)
* How much control do you think you had over what you wanted to work on?

(5 meaning complete control; 0 meaning no control at all)

* To what extent was your opinion about your family needs accepted by the coach? (5 meaning completed accepted; 0 meaning not at all accepted)
* To what extent the Sure Steps worker was ‘on the same wavelength’ as you?

(5 meaning completely on my wavelength; 0 meaning not at all on my wavelength)

* To what extent did you achieve your goals?

(5 meaning completely achieved my goals; 0 did not achieve my goals at all)

* As a result of your participation in Sure Steps, what was the most important (significant) change that occurred in your family?
* Why is this important to you/or people involved?
* What difference has this made or will make in the future?
* Overall, what were the most helpful things for you when you were involved with Sure Steps?
* Overall, what were the least helpful things for you when you were involved with Sure Steps?
* Do you have any suggestions for improvement in the Sure Steps program?

1. Staff Interview Schedule

Evaluation of the Sure Steps Program

Semi-structured interview schedule: YFS Staff

Introduction

This research is being conducted by the Parenting Research Centre (PRC) on behalf of YFS Logan. The aim is to learn more about the implementation and early outcomes of the Sure Steps program and to learn how to best reach and support vulnerable families.

The research has been approved by the Parenting Research Centre Human Research Ethics Committee (Melbourne).

We will be conducting interviews aimed at gathering information about your perceptions of the Sure Steps program and to better understand how this program is being implemented, along with the potential impacts and outcomes of the program.

The interview will take about one hour and will be audio-recorded where possible so useful unidentifiable quotes can be used for reporting. We will not record any identifying information about you. Therefore we ask that you refrain from using people’s actual names when describing services, families or events, or discuss sensitive case information or your personal opinions. You are invited to use a pseudonym to refer to yourself throughout the focus group/interview.

We will also be asking you to complete a short demographic questionnaire to assist with understanding the backgrounds of focus group/interview participants.

We will delete any names or identifying information from transcripts and questionnaires, and the audio tapes and questionnaires will be securely stored at the Parenting Research Centre with access only to approved researchers.

Please be aware that although your working experience and feedback on the Sure Steps program is extremely valuable to us, however you are not obliged to participate in this focus group/interview, and if you would like to be present, you do not have to contribute to the discussion. You may decide to retract consent at any stage prior to participating in the group discussions. However, information provided by you during group discussions will not be able to be removed because it cannot be identified.

Do you have any questions?

Semi Structure Interview

* How is the Sure Steps program different compared to other approaches?
* How is the program helpful in engaging families?
* What elements of the program are the most effective in engaging families?
* What activities covered in the program are the most helpful for the families?
* What activities covered in the program are the least helpful for the families?
* What are the factors that support consistent implementation of Sure Steps?
* What are the factors that inhibit consistent implementation of Sure Steps?
* What is your key learning in delivering this program?
* Are there aspects of Sure Steps that are more challenging to implement?
* What improvements or changes in families have you observed as a result of the implementation of Sure Steps?

1. What impact does the complexity and/or severity of family needs have on their ability to achieve their goals. How and why?
2. How could Sure Steps be improved?

Demographics:

Current role:

Number of years working in this role:

Education level:

Years of experience in working with vulnerable families:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status:

Culturally and Linguistically diverse:

Gender:

Age:

1. Stakeholders Interview Schedule

Evaluation of the Sure Steps Program

Semi-structured interview schedule: Stakeholders

Introduction

This research is being conducted by the Parenting Research Centre (PRC) on behalf of YFS Logan. The aim is to learn more about the implementation and early outcomes of the Sure Steps program and to learn how to best reach and support vulnerable families.

The research has been approved by the Parenting Research Centre Human Research Ethics Committee (Melbourne).

We will be conducting a focus group/interviews aimed at gathering information about your perceptions of the Sure Steps program and to better understand how this program is being implemented, along with the potential impacts and outcomes of the program.

The interview/focus group will take about one hour and will be audio-recorded where possible so useful unidentifiable quotes can be used for reporting. We will not record any identifying information about you or your organisation Therefore we ask that you refrain from using people’s actual names when describing services, families or events, or discuss sensitive case information or your personal opinions. You are invited to use a pseudonym to refer to yourself throughout the focus group/interview.

We will also be asking you to complete a short demographic questionnaire to assist with understanding the backgrounds of focus group/interview participants.

We will delete any names or identifying information from transcripts and questionnaires, and the audio tapes and questionnaires will be securely stored at the Parenting Research Centre with access only to approved researchers.

Please be aware that although your feedback on the Sure Steps program is extremely valuable to us, you are not obliged to participate in this focus group/interview, and if you would like to be present, you do not have to contribute to the discussion. You may decide to retract consent at any stage prior to participating in the group discussions. However, information provided by you during group discussions will not be able to be removed because it cannot be identified.

* Do you have any questions?
* Semi Structured Interview Schedule
* In your view, how the Sure Steps program was different from other similar community based support programs?
* What were some of the elements of the program that were appealing to you?
* What do you see as critical components of the program?
* In your view, what worked well?
* In your view, what did not work well? What were some barriers?
* In your view, was the program helpful for the participating families?
* In your view, what could be improved?
* If you had your time over, would you be involved with the Sure Steps program again?
* In your opinion, is the Sure Steps program a good value for money?
* Would you support its continuation and/or expansion?

Demographics

Your organisation:

Your current role:

Number of years working in the current role:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status:

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse status:

Gender:

Age:

Appendix E Sure Steps – Referral Protocol

Key messages

2 Generational Project (Sure Steps) provides:

* A focus on improved understanding of child development and family relationships
* Links with Logan Together
* Opportunities for parents to be better resourced and able to share experience with other parents
* An early intervention approach (building on parental hopes and priorities for their family, rather than a problem solving approach that relates to the child safety system).

1. **Referral Eligibility**

A family is considered eligible for the *Two Generational Project* on the following conditions:

1. Public Housing tenants in Logan City demonstrating early signs of tenancy difficulties, and
2. Family expecting or has at least one child under 8 years,
3. Family has an interest in knowing more about child development and express interest in participating in program.

Preference will be given to families who:

1. **are expecting a child and/or with children under 3 years**
2. **are not accessing other family support services**
3. **Referral Source**

* Self-referred

Referral agencies who may support families to engage include:

* Department of Housing and Public Works (Logan Housing Service Centre)
* YFS Connect
* Queensland Police
* Queensland Health
* Community Centres
* Schools

**N.B. 2 Generational Project is not a crisis response service**

1. **Referral Process**

* Referral agency contacts YFS to confirm eligibility and 2 Generational vacancy
* Referral agency has a preliminary discussion with the parent about the project and confirms interest in participating in the project and provides information for family to contact YFS, and support to do so if needed

1. **Managing referrals**

The YFS Senior Specialist Worker (SSW) for 2 Generations Project manages the referrals. If the SSW is not available this role is delegated to the Lead Parent Coach. Referral management responsibilities include:

* communicating regularly with referral sources about vacancies
* engaging with Department of Housing contact to confirm a suitable candidate and confirm tenancy
* facilitating contact with the family no more than 2 working days of receipt of the referral
* arranging for any key supports (cultural or advocates) to be involved in the referral process if preferred.
* informing the referral source about the referral outcome
* allocating a Parent Coach to the family

1. **Consent and Information Sharing**

Client consent for use of their information is an integral component of the *2 Generational*  *Project*. Signed consent from the parent/s is critical to allow the project to work transparently with families.

When engaged in the project, parents will be asked to complete a YFS *Authority to Gain or Release Information* form and nominate any current or specific information that they are willing to share. Also required will be consent regarding information passed on to YFS from Department of Housing and Public Works, and where applicable other partner agencies such as Queensland Health; Queensland Police and Logan Together.

The consent will be voluntary, informed, specific, current and can be withdrawn at any time. This means that the parent has control over, and knowledge of, what is being done with their personal information.

1. **Initial Contact**

The Senior Specialist Worker or the Parent Coaches should commence initial contact as soon as they receive the referral. The initial contact phase could include the following if required or possible:

* Ensure families and parents have support person for the meeting if required – they may be a person from the referral source.
* Provide additional information about the *2 Generational Project*
* Provide information about their *client rights and responsibilities* if opting to participate in the project
* Ensure the family is eligible and is suitable to the Department of Housing
* Engage the parent/s through getting them to describe their aspirations for their children and family and planning to do something practical as soon as possible
* Getting a feel for the family about their readiness for engagement in the project

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Surry Hills, New South Wales, 2010

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1. This does not include interpreters used to enable Family Coaching, but for other purposes, as Sure Steps used interpreters 29 times during the evaluative window. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)