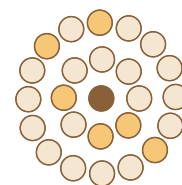


# The **Healthy Childhood** Research Newsletter

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## Healthy Childhood Research Group

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## Editorial

Jacqueline Hayden

### The resilience of community organisations: What we need to know

Healthy Childhood Research Group, in conjunction with Children First Inc, has recently completed an unusual investigation<sup>1</sup>. We wanted to know if there was a reason why some organisations transcend, even thrive, in an environment of change while other organisations are flummoxed by it.

Thus we set out to identify attributes and factors which influence *sustainability and resilience* of community service organisations during times of demographic, economic and socio-political change.

Our study involved a case study of one long-standing community organisation (55 years) in Western Sydney, NSW: Historical documents (newspapers, meeting minutes and other items) were analysed. Interviews, questionnaires and focus groups with key players (both past and current) within the organisation were conducted. The role of social capital as a measure of responsiveness and sustainability was assessed along with staff and family perceptions about strengths and weaknesses of the organisation.

Management practices were audited. Agents who liaised with the organisation in a variety of roles were interviewed.

In total, 206 respondents took part in the study.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to UWS Partnership Programs and Children First for their generous support of this project.

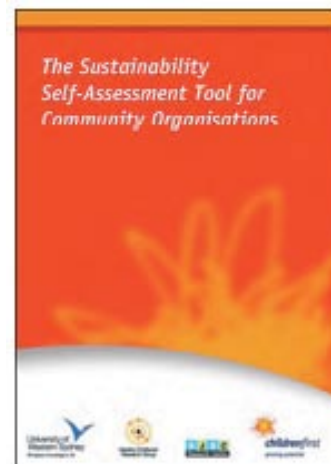
<sup>2</sup> All qualitative data (interviews and focus groups) were analysed with the assistance of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). The social capital questionnaires were analysed using SPSS (version 12). Findings were validated through a critical reference group from similar but unrelated organisations.

## Findings: The Sustainability Self-Assessment Tool

The study indicated that three broad categories of activity influence the effectiveness of community organisations. These are: management practices, community responsiveness and facilitation of social capital.

Some of the success strategies within these categories include

- transparent and articulated processes and goals
- participatory forms of decision making both internally (with the employees) and externally (with community representatives through the management committee/board)
- the ability to gather information about and be responsive to the needs of the community
- the fostering of networks and trust relationships (social capital) and
- a commitment to share knowledge and skills within their community (capacity build).



Whilst there are rich literatures about each of these items, we noted that there was a dearth of guidelines for organisations to assist them in assessing and enhancing their resilience, sustainability and responsiveness to community needs.

*The Sustainability Self-Assessment Tool* was developed to address this gap.

*The Sustainability Self-Assessment Tool* emerged from the findings of our study. The tool was reviewed and validated by a variety of stakeholders around the state. After several refinements, the tool was judged to be useful as a first step in assessing an organisation's strengths and weakness vis a vis responsive and sustainable service delivery.

*The Sustainability Self-Assessment Tool* is available at [www.healthychildhood.org/publications.htm](http://www.healthychildhood.org/publications.htm)

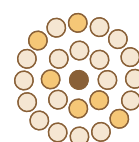
## Need for further information and research projects

A major outcome of this project was the identification of gaps in our knowledge base. Below we list some of the areas for further research which could benefit organisations struggling within a context of change. We hope that this list will assist services and agents to embark on their own action research projects to further our understanding of this critical area of community development.

**Findings revealed the need for attention to the following issues:**

### **I. There is a need to research a broadened definition of community.**

In our investigations it became difficult to assess measures of community 'support' and other items related to levels of social capital. This is because it was revealed that a large number of families live outside the geographical 'community' in which they work, shop and



make use child care and other services. In light of what we called *daily mobility* of families, we recommend that research be undertaken to investigate new, broadened concepts of community and how these affect quality of life for young children and their families.

**2. Research involving historical and documentary reviews of organisations raises awareness about past goals, contributes to a sense of continuity and provides a foundation for assessing future directions.**

The process of historical investigation conducted on our case study organisation provided a fertile foundation upon which to examine and build upon its past strengths and significantly contributed to our understanding of its current ways of working. The historical review, especially interviews with key players from the past, the review of historical documents and the identification of contemporaneous contextual (social and political) issues provided insights which helped the organisation to envision the continuity with its past and to reflect upon its directions for the future. This exercise was rated by participants as one of the most valuable outcomes of the study.

**3. During times of change and/or expansion, organisations need to undertake frequent audits of all staff members to ensure that communication and decision making processes remain effective.**

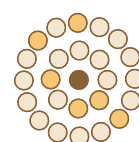
Expansion can result in staff feeling alienated, out of touch and potentially hostile towards with new sectors. Staff may lose confidence in their own ability to effect decision-making processes and to garner support from management. Some strategies which were shown to counter this included a 2-way communication strategy by upper management, an employee newsletter and the instigation of professional development for staff as an internal retreat which included team building as well as information sharing .

**4. Organisations need to identify ‘key players’ in their communities who can network and mobilise support from diverse sources.**

A sense of community ownership and commitment strengthens organisational sustainability. Various processes and activities contribute to this. The threat that service delivery could be ‘taken over’ by outside agencies can actually provide impetus for mobilising action and securing support from local decision makers. Key players who have strong community profiles and management board members who represent many sectors were shown in this study to be critical to organisation resilience and development.

**5. The facilitation of social capital needs to be included as a measure of quality for diverse types of children’s services.**

How (different types of) children’s services contribute to enhanced social capital and, concomitantly, how to facilitate social capital through children’s services (including out of school services) is in need of investigation. In this study it was noted that families who scored high on measures of social capital were those with opportunities to interact and network with staff and other families through their service provider. Thus preschool services scored most highly. Long day care services scored second highest and outside school hours care services scored lowest in measures of social capital for staff and families. This



finding needs to be taken into account in the analysis of costs and benefits for various service types. While preschools are often promoted because of their school-readiness goals, their contribution towards enhanced social capital for families may be equally (if not more) valuable. In light of research which ties social capital to health and well-being, this concept deserves further exploration.

### **6. Organisations can benefit from use of *The Sustainability Self-Assessment Tool***

In the fluid environments in which most community organisations find themselves, much work is needed to develop and assess the strategies which will build up organisational resilience to cope with diverse and changing conditions. Action research projects in diverse agencies would be valuable to refine and qualify the *The Sustainability Self-Assessment Tool* and to identify strategies for organisations to improve their scores in various categories.

For further information see

Hadley, F., Hayden, J. & Achlin, I. (2006) *Social capital, participatory management and community development: Sustaining a community organisation in Blacktown*. Report for Children First Inc. The full report and ***The Sustainability Self-Assessment Tool*** are available on this website [www.healthychildhood.org/publications.htm](http://www.healthychildhood.org/publications.htm)

## **News and updates**

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Welcome to our newly updated website. [www.healthychildhood.org](http://www.healthychildhood.org) Please note numerous new articles, reports, tools and PowerPoint presentations have been added to the site. Please contact us with any questions or comments: [h.promoting@uws.edu.au](mailto:h.promoting@uws.edu.au)

### **New additions to the website**

[www.healthychildhood.org](http://www.healthychildhood.org)

#### **Article**

Hayden, J. (2006). Beyond the gender differential: Very young children coping with HIV  
*AIDS Children and Society*. 20(2) .153-166

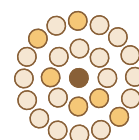
#### **Reports**

Hayden, J and De Gioia, K. (2006). *I'm Starting School: An analysis of transition to school needs for children in rural and inner city areas*. Report for Department of Education and Training,

Hayden, J. & De Gioia, K. (2006) *Effective transition to school processes for the Catholic School system*. Report for the Catholic Education Office

Hadley, F., Hayden, J. & Achlin, I. (2006) *Social capital, participatory management and community development: Sustaining a community organisation in Blacktown*. Report for Children First Inc.

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## Tools

Hadley, F., Hayden, J. & Achlin, I. (2006) *Self assessment tool for sustainability of community organisations*. Children First Inc

Hayden, J., & De Gioia, K. (2006) *Families and schools working together: A handbook for effective transition to school*. Catholic Education Office, Sydney Archdiocese.

Hayden, J., & De Gioia, K. (2005). *I'm Starting School! - An interactive package for families and children*. (Booklet and Poster) Department of Education and Training, Government of NSW.

## Package and CD rom

The entire package *The Health Promoting Early Childhood Program: Linking families and communities* - including the CD Rom with all documents, the manual and the *Health Promoting Video* - is available at [www.healthychildhood.org/p\\_cd.htm](http://www.healthychildhood.org/p_cd.htm)

## PowerPoint presentations<sup>3</sup>

- *Health Promotion in Early Childhood Services*
- *I'm Starting School*
- *Transition to School: Meeting the needs of ATSI families entering preschool and school systems*

These presentations are available at [www.healthychildhood.org/publications.htm](http://www.healthychildhood.org/publications.htm)

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<sup>3</sup> These should be cited with name of author(s) and link address.

# New research projects

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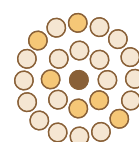
## **Children in conflict affected societies**

This project is investigating the experiences of children in conflict and post conflict situations. Eight case studies are used to demonstrate how early childhood service providers are working with children, families and communities to promote peace and reconciliation under extreme conditions.

Under the auspices of the *World Forum Foundation* and *NIPPA (Northern Ireland Pre Primary Association)*, a book is being developed from the project. The book, edited by Paul Connolly of Queens University, Belfast, and Jacqueline Hayden, University of Western Sydney captures the voices and stories of front line early childhood workers and children who live with conflict, violence and deprivation on a daily basis. The book will be launched at the **World Forum**, Malaysia, 2007. See <http://www.childcareexchange.com/wf/wf2007>

See the ***The Health Promoting Early Childhood Program*** menu button for information about other projects and products of the Healthy Childhood Research Group - [www.healthychildhood.org/pdf/OverviewHCRG.pdf](http://www.healthychildhood.org/pdf/OverviewHCRG.pdf)

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## Post-graduate distance education courses in *Child and Youth Studies*

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The University of Western Sydney, Australia is offering postgraduate courses in Child and Youth Studies. Students can exit with a Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma or a Masters degree in this specialty. The course is entirely web-based and can be accessed by students in any nation. For information contact [t.griffin@uws.edu.au](mailto:t.griffin@uws.edu.au)

Application forms are available from  
Domestic (in Australia) [study@uws.edu.au](mailto:study@uws.edu.au)  
International (not in Australia)  
[internationalstudy@uws.edu.au](mailto:internationalstudy@uws.edu.au)

The brochure for Child & Youth Studies is available at  
[www.healthychildhood.org/pdf/MasterSocSci.pdf](http://www.healthychildhood.org/pdf/MasterSocSci.pdf)

