



**Family Services Illawarra Ltd
Let's Play! Let's Eat! Report**

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Acknowledgements

This report is an evaluation of the Let's Play! Let's Eat! (LPLE) Project. This project is a partnership between The Department of Education, Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District and the Discovery Space at the University of Wollongong.

Family Services Illawarra would like to acknowledge the partnership in this project with Schools as Community Centres, Early Start Discovery Space, ISLHD Stir it Up Project who all helped make the project possible.

Family Services Illawarra would like to acknowledge the volunteers from both the Discovery Space for their weekly input with the participating children and Stir it Up Project for their support in sharing their culinary skills with the adult participants.

Family Services Illawarra would like to acknowledge the partnership with University of Wollongong in providing access to the Early Start Discovery Space facility, both in the play space and in the Commercial kitchen to support our project.

Family Services Illawarra would like to acknowledge the participating adults and children for their enthusiasm in embracing the play based and nutritional activities within the project.



Introduction

Family Services Illawarra along with the Department of Education Schools as Community Centres (SACC) at Albion Park Rail and Farmborough Road discussed together the possibility of developing a nutrition and play based program. This project would focus on the vulnerabilities highlighted in the 2012 and 2015 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data collection – nutrition and attachment.

The AEDC is a population measure of how young children in Australia have developed by the time they start their first full year at school. The AEDC is evidence based and highlights areas of strength as well as what support is needed to assist families in health, education and community planning. The AEDC collects data relating to five key areas of early childhood development referred to as 'domains' which have shown to predict later health, wellbeing and academic success , these include:

- Physical health and well-being
- Social competence
- Emotional maturity
- Language and cognitive skills
- Communication skills and general knowledge



In the Beginning

Both Family Services Illawarra and Schools as Community Centres felt that a project that would focus on nutrition and attachment would greatly benefit families as well as address vulnerabilities identified in the AEDC. The School's as Community Centre's were required to spend funds specifically on an AEDC activity so therefore were in a position to support the project financially.

The initial two partners developed a concept that included a play group activity with a nutrition focus. The program would be an eight week program facilitated once in term 4 2015 and once in term 1 2016. The first group would be for Wollongong LGA families and the second would be for Indigenous families from the Shellharbour LGA.

After some discussion it was decided that this concept would be possible if the partnership included The University of Wollongong Discovery Space to provide an exceptional learning centre that facilitates play based learning activities for children and their families.

The partnership would also need to incorporate a source to provide nutritional information. It was agreed that Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health Department's Stir it Up Project should be included to assist the initiative by providing nutritional support in the way of menu ideas, resources and volunteers to demonstrate and support families in cooking.



Project Proposal

A meeting was held between partners to develop a working proposal that would be developed, refined and evaluated as the project progressed. At this meeting it was decided that each partner would offer different commitments to the project. The initial commitments included:

Family Services Illawarra – Child Youth and Family Services (CYFS)

- Recruitment of families
- One worker for the nutrition program
- Two workers for child minding if needed

Schools as Community Centres (SACC)

- The cost of entry and yearly membership to the Discovery Space
- The cost of transport to the space for the duration of the program for families if needed
- The cost of the food for the cooking classes and for morning tea

University Of Wollongong (UOW) Early Start

- Provision of commercial kitchen for cooking
- Possibly support evaluation
- Space for sharing a meal with parents and children

Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health Department - Stir it Up Project

- Provision of volunteer to run the cooking program

The program proposal addressed the program concept, program guidelines, target audience, lead agency and contributing organisations, program purpose, and problems and challenges to resolve.



Making it Happen

Although the proposed project concept seemed like it would work. The partners now needed to make it happen. It was agreed that recruitment needed to be targeted to those families that would most benefit. Families who were currently part of Family Services Illawarra Child Youth and Family Support program would be approached by the worker currently engaged with that family. This enabled the Family Worker to explain the concept of the program to families as well as market it as a positive ongoing benefit with the inclusion of an annual membership upon completion. Families known to the Schools as Community Centres were also invited to participate.

It's all in a name and this is exactly what the project needed. Staff at Family Services Illawarra were told about the exciting project and asked if they could come up for a name. A family worker suggested Let's Play! Let's Eat! and immediately all project workers were won over. The name was simple but catchy and really explained exactly what the project was all about.

A flyer was created to promote the project, however it was not advertised externally only handed to families directly by workers. It incorporated both the attachment and nutritional goals, featured a map of Wollongong and the University and clearly identified the Early Start Building. It displayed all stakeholder logos and gave information regarding State Debt where qualifying families could reduce their state debt under a Working Development Order (WDO).

Once the families agreed to participate in the project they were contacted by project workers to give final details of the eight week program.



A Grant that gave a **Boost**

During the initial stages Family Services Illawarra became aware of a grant being offered that may fit with the Let's Play! Let's Eat! Program. Making Healthy Normal is a community project that provides small scale subsidies to community organisations for initiatives that promote and support healthy eating and active living in NSW in line with The NSW Healthy Eating and Active Living Strategy 2013-2018.

Subsidies of up to \$1000 were available to services in the community based on an application process, funded by the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District (ISLHD) and administered through the Illawarra Forum.

In order to apply for a 'Make Healthy Normal' strategy subsidy, it was necessary to answer the following criteria:

What is your idea?

How will this benefit the health of your service or community?

How will you know that your project has worked?

What will be your contribution to the project?

How much money do you estimate you will need to complete this project?

What will you use the money for in general terms?

Provide a short budget.

The Let's Play! Let's Eat! Project decided to apply for this grant and received \$1000 towards the cost of running 8 healthy/budget cooking skills sessions with families attending a play based activity program in the Early Start Discovery Space at the University of Wollongong.



Desired Outcomes

The Let's Play! Let's Eat! Project had two main outcomes that it hoped to achieve. The first was to improve the attachment between parent and child. The second was to improve family's knowledge of nutrition and how food impacts their health and wellbeing.

Attachment

The purpose of the Let's Play! Let's Eat! Project was to improve ongoing socialisation of parents and children in a positive atmosphere. This outcome was hoped to be achieved by increasing community connections as well as developing family connections/attachments and interactions between parents and children.

Nutrition

The purpose of the Let's Play! Let's Eat! Project was to develop and implement a program to increase participant's knowledge of nutrition and how food impacts health and wellbeing. Each cooking session was aimed at providing families with nutritional education and practical life skills revolving around cooking, food identification, promotion of healthy choices and an understanding of the impact nutrition has on health and wellbeing.

Another desired long term outcome included the improved socialisation and community connection between families. The Discovery Space was seen as an excellent non-threatening space where families could connect and build relationship with each other and with the community. A twelve month membership to the Discovery Space for each family after completion of the program enabled families to sustain the relationships built and continue the connections made with their own children and the other participants.

Documented assessment and compilation of feedback from the perspective of both adult and child participants was an additional preconceived outcome to ensure future projects are refined and improved accordingly.



Program Structure

An important outcome of the Let's Play! Let's Eat! Project was to foster positive interactions between parents and their children within the Discovery Space. For the duration of the eight week program, parents and children were encouraged to arrive at the Discovery Space, enter it upon arrival and spend some of the initial time discovering it together. Four weeks out of the eight week program were dedicated to the parents interacting with their children entirely in the space for the whole session. During the morning families were encouraged to participate in free play and discover the space through play led by their children. They were also encouraged to participate in activities organised by The Discovery Space staff including a CreARTivity activity and a Book Nook reading activity. The interaction and attachment experiences were embraced by both the parents and the children. It was the role of staff involved in the project to engage families by having informal conversations as well as facilitate play with the children. At the end of the time of play in the Discovery Space all participants enjoyed a healthy morning tea together prepared by staff. Morning tea was shared all together including staff, parents and children.

“The space is great and stress free. Unlike a park or other play areas, you know your children are safe and that you can relax and enjoy playing with them. I can be a big kid again” - Participant C, Male

Nutrition – Stir it Up

A significant outcome for the Let's Play! Let's Eat! Project was to increase knowledge and skills in nutritional health and wellbeing. Throughout the eight week program, four weeks were scheduled for the parents to have a cooking session where they would learn to prepare a meal, increase their understanding of how they can provide healthy food for their families and enjoy eating healthy food together. With the help of Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health Department, themes were developed for each cooking week. The themes included breakfasts, lunches, dinners and snacks or lunch box ideas. The recipes used were nutritious and were not complex so that parents were able to reproduce the recipes at home.

Alternative options to allow for tastes, finances and seasons (eg. Pizzas with different bases and fresh toppings) were also offered. The ingredients were wholesome and fresh, discussions were very open with the group to include their knowledge and share it with the rest of the group. This was a great sharing experience with parents having a wealth of knowledge around nutrition, budget and general recipe “tricks” that everyone could utilize.

During the cooking time the staff were able to develop connections between parents and staff by having informal conversations and help facilitate a fun learning environment. Parents particularly enjoyed working in small teams to present their food.

While the parents cooked upstairs in the Early Start building, the children were minded in the Discovery Space by staff from Family Services Illawarra and Schools as Community Centres. This was tricky to ensure ratios were adhered to as well as a big step for parents and children to separate.

After parents finished cooking the staff minding the children downstairs assisted the children to walk upstairs to join their parents. All participants including parents, children and staff shared the meal prepared in the dining area adjacent to the kitchen. At each meal the tables were set with table cloths to model good meal habits. All prepared food was shared and leftovers taken home. Cleaning up of the dining room and kitchen was carried out by some parents if able and staff. Staff really wanted to be available to engage in conversations and encourage all cooking efforts so cleaning was not a priority until after parents left. Children were not permitted in the kitchen area as set out by the UOW safety guidelines.

On the last week of the program a celebration and graduation took place where families were able to play with their children, enjoy morning tea and be part of a graduation ceremony where their children also receive a completion certificate. The last week is very celebratory to recognize the achievement of completing an eight week program – a huge commitment for many parents.

“Making even simple things like homemade pizza, I would have never thought of doing. I have even tried it at home a few times...though it hasn’t tasted as good. I’ll need to practice a bit more” – Participant D, Female



With the very first Let's Play! Let's Eat! Program up and running it became apparent that this program was both fun as well as going to be so beneficial for families. As staff familiarised themselves with the program and how it looked each week, they were able to continually evaluate the needs of the project and the families themselves. The program team communicated weekly on a formal and informal basis in order to ensure expectations were being met and were still in fact realistic. Family Services Illawarra was able to coordinate this communication between all parties to ensure everyone was on the same page.

The Early Start staff provided use of the commercial kitchen upstairs which was utilised each week to cook in or to prepare morning tea. After two weeks it became apparent that a smaller space would be needed as both a base to start each group first thing as well as a space to end the group with morning tea.

This break away room was generously agreed to by Early Start staff which they set up each Friday morning with mats and age appropriate toys for babies as well as making it available for the sole use of the group. The room allowed parents and children to develop a sense of security with a familiar meeting point each week. It also provided a space for Early Start staff to provide a settling activity – usually a story, which helped with children separating from their parents.

It was also decided early in the program that it would be necessary to create child groupings assigned to a specific worker according to the child's age and needs. This was a flexible process with staff supporting each other if needed. The definite advantage of this was the connection made between workers and children. The children became familiar and secure with their consistent worker which increased their confidence in PLAY in the Discovery Space.

For the duration of the program, practical tasks were allocated each week to ensure everything was ready to start and at the end of the day. This included setting up the kitchen and break out room, shopping for ingredients, washing up, packing up of equipment and cleaning of areas used. This made the 2 hour session each week more relaxed for the participants and the workers.

It was also advantageous to liaise with the Early Start Discovery Space team weekly prior to the session commencing. In consulting on a regular basis, it allowed for changes to be made regarding time frames, available staff, inclement weather and the use of specific public areas in the Discovery Space. Regular communication ensured we were allowing for all partners perspective as the program rolled out.

Initial Feedback

The program itself was proving to be a great model and with regular and flexible staff it was able to be “tweaked” as it flowed through the first 8 weeks. It was obviously difficult to predict certain factors including the individual needs of each family. However knowing this as well as being open to the needs of each family participating allowed the group to evolve as it should and would in each succeeding program.

It was noted that for future collaboration a memorandum of understanding would be advantageous to establish a more formal agreement regarding the Let’s Play! Let’s Eat! Project. This would outline the requirements and responsibilities of each stakeholder.

Whilst the communication and collaboration of all stakeholders has been noted as a success, it is suggested that a Leader on site be appointed to liaise between all parties as a reference point for communication. This will reduce any confusion when communicating amongst the many reference points of the project and the locational difficulties faced in the Discovery Space itself.

A suggestion has been made to purchase melamine crockery to reduce the weight of the crockery substantially as a benefit to the workers lifting it each week.

Throughout the project, it is recognised that the participants are still undergoing life events that require some form of support from their referral worker or Family Services Illawarra and/or Schools as Community Centres. It is suggested that workers need guidelines on how advocacy is to be undertaken regarding the needs of the participants.

It was noted that only one family needed assistance financially with transport to the Discovery Space which was achieved by assisting the family purchase an Opal card.



Evaluation

The process of evaluation began from the onset and was used to refine the structure and strategies of the project through weekly informal evaluations collected from the workers and participants. Comprehensive data was collected during pre and post program through adult questionnaires, observational evaluation of children and informal interviews with adults as a reflection of the program's effectiveness to meet the predetermined goals and ensure improvement in the future.

The following outcomes were determined in line with the purpose of the program and were used to guide the evaluation process:

1. Improvement in family connections/ attachment and interactions between parents and children
2. Increase in participant's knowledge of nutrition and how food impacts health and wellbeing
3. Improved socialisation and community connection – use of the Discovery Space across the year as a positive activity for families and a meeting place for participants to maintain an ongoing connection
4. Documented assessment and compilation of detailed feedback from perspective of both adult and child participants.

Some outcomes from the initial evaluation include:

Outcome 1 – The results from the questionnaire represent a slight negative to no change in attitude toward the interactions and attachment with their children. These results are contrasting to the other information gathered

Outcome 2 - Through the questionnaires there is a recorded overall improvement in the participant's knowledge of nutrition and health.

Outcome 3 - Through observation methods and conversations with the participants, it has been very clear of increased socialisations between parents and amongst the children, particularly using the Space as a point of interaction.

An amazing outcome that we did not anticipate was two parents , one from the very first group and one from the second Aboriginal specific group sign up to become a Stir it Up volunteer. This involved a 19 week training program once per week. Both parents committed to this training and graduated in December 2016 as a volunteer with the program. The two parents are now volunteers and mentored by Family Services Illawarra. One parent is volunteering with our current Let's Play! Let's Eat! Program.

Sustainability & Development

After the initial first two groups which were originally funded through Schools As Community Centres, it became obvious to Family Services that this was a group that was really worth investing in. Since the first two groups to date there have been three subsequent programs facilitated. The three subsequent programs have been facilitated through Family Services Illawarra Group Work program under Child Youth and Family support program. Assistance has been received with volunteers provided from the Stir it Up program and the Discovery Space staff provide support each week for the program. This support includes providing an activity for the children that has key messages for the children and parents, assisting with parents upon arrival, providing parking in the car park under the play space for parents, and continuing to provide the kitchen at no cost to family Services Illawarra.

Over the five groups we have had: & 51 adults and 72 children participate. Many additional family members have benefited from the Discovery Space Learning environment through the annual membership for the whole family received after completion of the program.

The program has evolved to some extent with details changing along the way to ensure individual family's nutritional and cultural needs are met as well as the social and emotional needs of the children. The program has worked well by beginning with the first two weeks being Play weeks so that the families can feel connected to staff, the space and with leaving their children with the child minders.

We have found that volunteers have enjoyed being a part of the program which enables the costs to be reduced and allows a greater depth of learning for families.

The program has proven to be a great means of addressing social isolation for parents and subsequently their children. The program has provided a way where parents can link into their community and learn and share from other parents.

The last three programs have been advertised through networks and referrals for the program have come through many community services to a central triage group wait list at family Services Illawarra. Word of mouth has certainly impacted the number of families who have shown interest in attending. The last group was closed off with a capacity number attending.

Let's Play! Let's Eat! Is a program that parents and children have certainly enjoyed and hopefully learnt some things about themselves, their children and their community. Family Services hopes that this program can continue into the future however this is very dependent on funding and sponsorship to maintain the cost and integrity of the program.

Testimonial

This letter is to explain how my son has improved with help from various services. Family Services Illawarra was my main support which helped me to access the resources that I needed for James. James, who is now 8, was diagnosed in the Autism Spectrum Disorder. FSI communicated with other services e.g. Speech Therapy, to help James develop with his ASD.

James major change came toward the end of last year when I was contacted by FSI and asked if I wanted to participate in an food program running at the University of Wollongong, I said yes. James had been playing up at school and forever getting suspended. The school was suggesting to me that James might need to be medicated. My reply was to let me try and get James diet right. James at this stage wasn't eating properly and my think was if James had the right balance of food in his system that he would settle at school.

From the first week of the course James diet started to change. Getting James to eat eggs was simple, make French Toast. Now James was getting the protein he needed in his system. As the weeks progressed James was happy to try new foods. Some foods he liked and some he didn't, for me I learnt that there was a different way to present James with the foods he didn't like and sometimes he accepted it.

The course finished in December 2015, now April 2016, James is moving forward like a freight train. James hasn't been suspended from school. His behaviour has been a real eye opener with the school. I have not been called down to the school once this year and the best thing is that James is happy to go to school.

James and I eat out now at clubs with a proper sit down meal. He loves garlic cheese pizzas, chicken snitties, steak, mash potatoes. He has gone from eating French Toast to eating boiled eggs. Meal times are not stressful anymore. Not only has James diet and behaviour improved but also his speech.

So what does this mean for James and myself? I used to sit at home all day and wait for the school to ring for me to go down there to calm him down. Those days are now behind us. I feel confident enough for James to do the right thing at school that I finally have some time for me. I like to find work again. It will be a well needed boost for my self-esteem. It will definitely improve our life style. It will happen. I don't know how I'm going to do it but it's what I want to do and I will succeed for the both of us.

With a small organisation of outstanding support workers and courses to help make life easier, FSI has done more for James and myself than they realise.

David J Ross



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