



THE ART OF INTEGRATION AND THE BETTER BEGINNINGS GROUP

DONNA FEORE

The Better Beginnings group was formed in 2014, and was coordinated by Bayside Medicare Local. The group consisted of a number of agencies and services from the City of Kingston who came together with a shared understanding of the importance of the early years for improved outcomes for children and families. The Better Beginnings group decided to work together to develop an integrated approach to support local children to have the best possible start to life.

The group looked at a number of data sets including population, Maternal and Child Health, playgroup and kindergarten participation rates and the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). This data indicated that some children were doing well and other children not so well.

The group also understood the changing needs of families and the service system; acknowledging the current delivery of services was often complex and fragmented. In locations where there are many providers and programs, gaps or unnecessary duplication in services could make it difficult for families and providers to access the services they needed. The group sensed that by working in an integrated way, the result would be a more accessible and efficient service system with better outcomes for children and families.

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At this point the group decided to identify a project that would progress this objective. To that end we undertook an Appreciative Inquiry process. Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based model that engages groups in change by encouraging participants to look at what is working well, to ask questions and understand that if you can achieve excellence once you can do it again. This was an ‘Aha’ moment for the group and enabled us to move from discussing the issues to coming up with achievable and realistic actions.

Through Appreciative Inquiry the group identified the significant value in developing a range of resources that would strengthen the shared understanding of how agencies and services in the City of Kingston work together with children and families to create a ‘no wrong door’ culture among professionals and to improve the service system at the local level. The resources developed include an:

- Early Years Induction Resource;
- Early Years Induction Resource Executive Summary and PowerPoint presentation; and
- Video.

The resources have been designed to be used as a flexible shared induction tool for existing and new staff members who work with children and families in the City of Kingston; and they are accessible in a central location on the Kingston City Council’s website.

This shared approach aims to integrate ideas, philosophies and approaches to guiding local service provider’s everyday practice. Combined, they foster the opportunities which maximise the potential of children and their families, and are necessary ingredients in laying the foundation for local children’s future health and well-being.

Donna Feore is the Team Leader, Children’s Services Partnerships, Family Youth and Children’s Services at the City of Kingston

REFLECTIONS OF AN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL

The first few Better Beginnings meetings I attended consisted of a wide range of early childhood professionals. From department representatives, maternal child health nurses, speech therapists, occupational therapists, early intervention specialists, family support workers and other early years professionals.

At first I was a little bit apprehensive about what value I would bring to this group. I was sitting there thinking “I’m out of my league here” looking around at all the highly educated and respected professionals and feeling like “just a childcare worker”.

With the support of the group facilitator I started to understand the importance of my role. I was someone who saw first-hand every day the issues children and families were facing and could offer great insight to the group from this perspective.

It took another four monthly meetings for us, as a group to reach our “Aha!” moment. This was when the Appreciative Inquiry model was put to us.

From the moment it was introduced to us I loved the concept. I was sitting there thinking, “Yes! This is what we need”.

As a sector, particularly early childhood education and care, we focus so much on what isn’t working rather than what is. For example the Quality Improvement Plan focuses on areas for improvement and action plans to fix things rather than looking at we do really well and working back from there.

It was at this moment I thought that this would be a great tool to use at my centre. So at our next team meeting we used the Appreciative Inquiry model to help improve and guide our practices.

The educators really enjoyed using a method that helped to recognise what worked well and we got a lot out of using this positive approach. We felt empowered and capable of actioning our plan.

It was from being a part of this group that I realised that I am not just a childcare worker, I am an Early Childhood professional.

Ineke King (Centre Director, Goodstart Early Learning, Chelsea Heights)



Above: Members of the Better Beginnings Group, from left, Deanne Masters (SCOPE), Ali Johns (City of Kingston), Ineke King (Goodstart Early Learning), Donna Feore (City of Kingston), Lou Ambrosy (Noah’s Ark), Helene Kivell (Central Bayside Community Health Services).