



Breaking down the walls to build a village

A program that targets family needs in disadvantaged areas has proved a surprising winner. It might even be a great Howard legacy, writes **Adele Horin**.

Kristen Briggs's natural ebullience deserts her at Campbelltown Mall's food court. She's recalling the low point in her young life. It was Christmas 2004, she was 24 and had just given birth to her third child. Husband Wayne had recently lost his job, and they were trying to decide whether to buy food or pay the rent. The children's Christmas presents would have to stay on lay-by.

"I'd become one of the people you see in the ads," says Briggs, her striking blue eyes blurring with tears. "St Vinnies knocking on the door with a food hamper and toys ..."

Living in a cul de sac in Rosemeadow, a Campbelltown suburb where "everyone kept to themselves", the social isolation added to her distress. Rosemeadow had the usual come-and-go social programs, based mostly in the Campbelltown city centre, and Briggs had attended two programs for young mothers. But just when she needed them most, the programs closed, victims of the usual short-term state funding arrangements.

"I thought 'I can't get any lower than this,'" she says.

Today, Briggs is a cheerful beneficiary of the nation's most ambitious and promising social program – Communities for Children, a little-known legacy of the Howard government. The Rudd Government has committed to extend funding to at least 2012. Communities for Children shows it really does take a village to raise a child.

A hundred million dollars was spent in 45 selected neighbourhoods around Australia in the four years to 2008 on early intervention for children in their first five years. A similar amount will be spent over the next three years. Communities for Children was the Coalition government's answer to Tony Blair's SureStart in Britain, an internationally famous program to help children from poor neighbourhoods get off to a better start. John Howard and his minister for children, Larry Anthony, were enthusiasts.

A recent independent evaluation shows Australia's approach has been more success-

ful than Britain's SureStart at the same stage – and much less costly.

"It's showing us these area-based interventions can work in Australia; it has significant potential," says Kristy Muir, of the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW. She managed the complex and robust evaluation undertaken by a team from the centre and from the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Comparing 10 sites within the program with five similar neighbourhoods outside it, researchers found the program was making a difference after only three to four years.

Parents in the program were less hostile and harsh, and felt more effective and confident. Unemployment was lower and community participation higher; and parents were more inclined to believe their community was socially cohesive. And children were better at language expression and comprehension.

Hard-to-reach groups, such as lone parents and parents from some ethnic backgrounds, were being successfully engaged, and their children were just as likely to benefit.

The positive effects weren't huge. Children's behaviour problems and serious child injuries, for instance, persisted. But most indicators showed improvement, an impressive outcome given the program's effectiveness was measured across the entire neighbourhood, not just participating families.

SureStart, by comparison, produced early disappointment. Only longer term did the British program make the difference its boosters had anticipated.

Melanie Andrews, 33, is the manager of Communities for Children in Campbelltown. Her patch includes Ambarvale and Rosemeadow, where notorious riots erupted in January. Fifteen thousand people live there – a tenth of them under five. "You can see there's a lot of green open space," she says, as she drives out of one of the public housing estates with its small, tightly packed bungalows and ageing townhouses. Along stretches of the main road, it feels semi-rural. "The open space is an asset and a disadvantage," says Andrews. "There are lots



Upbeat ... the Communities for Children program changed Kristen Briggs's life. Photo: Ben Rushton

of hot spots for crime." An experienced social worker, with a background in community development in Redfern, Andrews for the past six years has worked for the Benevolent Society, the Howard government's choice as lead agency in Campbelltown.

The Howard government bypassed state governments and appointed non-government organisations to run Communities for Children in each of the 45 sites. Lead agencies control the purse strings, decide which other organisations to include, and oversee co-ordination.

Social isolation emerged as a huge problem for young families in community consultations conducted by the Benevolent Society in 2005. It decided to channel its \$2 million federal grant between 10 programs run by five agencies including the

YWCA, UnitingCare Burnside, Macarthur Diversity Services, and the Campbelltown City Council.

In the competitive, sometimes fractious world of welfare politics, the model of a boss agency among erstwhile peers was risky. But the evaluation shows, on the whole, it worked well. Two-thirds of agencies were working closely together last year, compared with a third previously. The program has eliminated duplication and competition and brought co-operation and focus to the work of welfare agencies that often plied the same patch in splendid isolation from each other. Services are more targeted and more families get access to them.

Campbelltown residents and agencies meet about monthly. The standout, says Andrews, is collaboration.



The Yummy Cafe is the heart of the program in Ambarvale. Transformed under a YWCA lease from an under-utilised council hall hosting occasional playgroups, it's now a hub of activity, the rejuvenated fiefdom of Tammy Conway, 35, the Y's community enterprise co-ordinator. A chef with experience at Sydney's Sheraton Wentworth Hotel and Yeppoon's Capricorn International Resort, Conway's greatest work satisfaction has been here. "Here you get to know your customers on a very personal level," she says.

The coffee is great, the food nutritious and cheap. She trains workers, runs a catering business that ploughs its profits back, and watches over the stream of parents who arrive for the weekly playgroup, the mobile toy and book library, the bike hire, the Y-Weight 12-week weight loss course and myriad other activities.

The path to Briggs's newfound happiness ran through the Yummy Cafe. While her oldest daughter Staci, now 11, was at school, she took Jordan, now 6, Mackenzie, 4, and her fourth baby, Ryleigh, 2, to the Street Treats playgroup run by UnitingCare Burnside.

Margaret Mohammed, 54, a trained early childhood specialist and mother of eight, draws up to 50 children to the Yummy cafe for Friday's playgroup. On other days, she takes the playgroup to the streets. She sets up on grassy patches outside the estates, even in people's front yards. Up go the shade tents, out comes the play equipment. The aim is to demonstrate the importance of play; in some cases, to show parents how to play with their children. It can take weeks for parents to emerge from behind closed doors.

"If we show ourselves each week and talk to people we build up their trust," says Mohammed. "We're tapping into families that haven't had an opportunity to tap into other child care services."

Briggs took advantage of each new service that came with Communities for Children. If she didn't have a car, a program-funded van picked her up. Being smart – she had attended a selective high school before dropping out in year 11 – she was willing to have a go.

For other women, less confident, or new to the area, the Community Connectors program was their lifeline. This was the bailiwick of Marcela Fernandez, 52, a community worker with Macarthur Diversity Services. Its

volunteers have knocked on doors – 3400 homes have been door knocked so far. They supply parents with an information pack, and offer to drive them on group outings, such as to the Flemington markets or the Cabramatta shops.

"Before there were one or two playgroups in the area," says Fernandez. "Now there are so many activities to enjoy."

For Briggs, the council's mobile toy and book library, run by Sarah Palmer, became a staple in her life; and the Happy Young Parents group, run by UnitingCare Burnside's Mariela Albornoz, 42, was an early base. Unlike some programs Briggs knew, this young parents' group still operates with secure funding. The young parents talk to an infant health nurse, hear from visiting experts on sex, relationships and other topics. They do craft; above all, they talk to each other.

Albornoz, who worked in drug and alcohol services, remembers the loneliness of arriving with her husband and baby from Chile 22 years ago. "The main thing is to raise the self-esteem of the young parents so they can be independent in their lives, go to TAFE, to uni, and follow their path," she says.

This was Briggs's path. Encouraged by the Benevolent Society's Andrews, she went to Campbelltown TAFE and completed a Certificate 4 in community services. Since April she has worked with the Benevolent Society as a community worker and as co-ordinator of the Camden youth cafe, a drop-in centre. Once alienated, she is deeply, passionately involved in her community. And her children are thriving.

"It's like I've come full circle," she says.

Not everyone is thrilled the Labor Government has extended to 12-year-olds the program's future target group without increasing the funding.

Graham Vimpani, a professor of pediatrics and child health at the University of Newcastle and an early adviser on the scheme, fears the program's impact could be diluted. Lack of involvement of key State Government departments is a weakness, he says, and the program is yet to show success in indigenous communities.

Even so, the Communities for Children early success has surprised many. The village is coming together for the sake of the kids. It could turn out to be John Howard's greatest legacy.