

## **Hidden Child Protection : Young People at Risk. Causes and Prevention**

### **Abstract:**

The decrease in traditional forms of support provided by extended family, friends and neighbours has resulted in an increased demand for external support from social welfare and other agencies for families and communities. A current trend in Australia is one where families must present with significant issues in order to be prioritised for assistance, effecting the availability and adequacy of services to a significant number of parents and families who could have benefited from early intervention and prevention programs (Tomison, 2002).

Centrelink is effectively a 'first to know' agency for a large number of young people who find themselves homeless following family breakdown. The Prime Minister's Youth Homeless Taskforce (DFaCS 1999) and other research has identified this as a critical period for early intervention and prevention (Healy and Richmond, 1999). This paper explores the nature of families in Australia today and factors leading to 'extreme family breakdown'. The main focus is an exploration of the factors contributing to the extreme family breakdown of some families in the Twin Cities region where a 15 to 17 year old adolescent is currently receiving the 'Unreasonable to Live at Home' rate of Youth Allowance. In addition, the current early intervention and prevention programs available to families will be explored based on information gained through in-depth interviews with professionals working with young people and families in the Twin Cities.

### **Defining Terms:**

**Twin Cities:** Townsville and Thuringowa are collectively known as the Twin Cities. Centrelink Twin Cities has four sites and is part of a larger entity known as Magnetic West which extends to Ayr/Home Hill in the South, Ingham/Cardwell in the North and Mt Isa / Normanton in the West (<http://centrenet/homepage/aso/areacnq/csc/magneticwest/index.htm>).

**Area Central & Northern Queensland (CNQ):** Covers about two thirds of Queensland. It extends from Gladstone in the South East, to Torres Strait in the North, to the Northern Territory border in the West and Birdsville in the South West. There are 779 000 people within this region, about half of whom are city based, the other half rural and remote. Area CNQ consists of about 800 staff servicing 380,000 customers again almost evenly split between city and rural/remote regions. A half of our customers live more than thirty minutes from their nearest Customer Service Centre (CSC). There are twenty eight CSC's in Area CNQ, two Call Centres, a Compliance office located in the Area Support Office in Townsville and a network of more than thirty agents servicing the needs of rural people and indigenous customers in remote communities (<http://centrenet/homepage/aso/areacnq/bisserv/links.htm>).

**Extreme Family Breakdown:** (Section 1067A (9)a, b &c of Social Security Act 1991, and Section 3.2.5. of the Guide to the Act, 1991) Family breakdown must be extreme involving serious actual or imminent risk to the young person. Sufficient proof under the serious risk provision may not be possible. However, thorough assessment and verification of the family's circumstances may conclude that the deterioration within the family is extreme enough to warrant separation of the young person from the family home. Family breakdown must be looked at in the context of the whole family situation. For extreme family breakdown to be established, it must be clear that it is unreasonable

to expect the person to remain in that family environment. This may include circumstances where there are extreme controlling behaviours to the detriment of the young person. Evidence must include personal contact with the customer (preferably face to face interview), parental contact, third party verification and contact with State/Territory child protection agencies for Youth Protocol cases (<http://centrenet/corp/yapp/index.html> 11 extrem.htm&2).

**Unreasonable to Live at Home Youth Allowance (UTLAH):** For the purpose of this research, the term 'young person' refers to an adolescent aged 15 to 17 years old. Young people are considered to be independent for Youth Allowance purposes if they cannot live at the home of either or both their parents because of extreme family breakdown or other similar exceptional circumstances; or it would be unreasonable to expect the person to do so as there would be a serious risk to his or her physical or mental well-being due to violence, sexual abuse or other similar unreasonable circumstances; or their parents are unable to provide the young person with a home because they lack stable accommodation (<http://centrenet/corp/gdessact/ssguide/32530.htm>).

**SAS:** SAS is a software system for data analysis and a registered trademark of SAS Institute Inc. When SAS was created in 1976, it was an acronym for 'Statistical Analysis System'. SAS is now a brand name and no longer an acronym for any particular application. The base SAS software provides tools for information storage and retrieval; data modification; report writing; statistical analysis; and file handling (<http://centrenet/homepage/aso/areabris/brisnetlunits/systems/nic/whatissas.htm>).

**Single-parent Family:** refers to a family where the parent/guardian is bringing up a child or children without a marital or defacto partner who also resides at the same address. **Blended Family:** refers to a family where one parent is the natural parent of the young person and that parent has either remarried, or re-partnered (de facto or boyfriend/girlfriend). The new partner lives in the same household as the natural parent and was there at the time of extreme family breakdown. There may or may not be step children in this family unit.

**Two-parent Family:** refers to a family where the two natural parents of the young person living in the same household (married or de facto), and the young person was living with these parents prior to leaving home as a result of extreme family breakdown.

#### **Background:**

In Australia, the issue of family is significant. We all have connections to 'families' and each of us has a biological mother and father, however not all of us grow up with, or near one or the other of them. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data shows that in 1992, 81% of children lived with both of their natural parents, 14 percent lived in single-parent families, 2 percent lived in step-families, and 5 percent lived in blended families (ABS, 1995). By 1997 the number of children living with their natural parents had decreased to 74%, and increased to 18% in single-parent families. Of the single-parent family group, 89 percent of children lived with their mother, and 11 percent with their father. These percentages remained the same in 1997 (ABS, 1995a; AIHW, 1998). In Australia, 1.1 million of a total 4.6 million children aged under eighteen live with only one of their natural parents as a result of relationship or marriage breakdown (ABS, 1998).

It is important to understand types of families and influencing factors in the broadest sense to offer insights and support to the community (Disney et al, 1996). Families may move through cycles of formation, change and reformation. Those families that begin as an intact couple or two-parent family may change, in part, following marriage or relationship breakdown to a single-parent family. In the event that the single-parent re-partners, the resulting family becomes a step-family and should that new couple have children, a blended-family is formed (ABS, 1998). Within families we can experience some of our strongest emotions, and it is presumed that young and vulnerable members are nurtured and protected emotionally, physically and spiritually (Baker, 2001; Bessant and Wafts, 1999; Disney et al, 1996). Evidence suggests the high dissolution rate of second marriages is inherently caused by conflict between family members rather than marital distress (Lawton & Sanders, 1994).

### **Family Breakdown:**

In reality, what people regard as their family is their family (Disney et al, 1996). Previous research by Healy and Richmond (1999), found that characteristically a young homeless person is a 16 or 17 year old female Anglo-Australian, who was a member of a blended family prior to extreme family breakdown. Unfortunately, high numbers of families that have broken down are unwilling to pursue formal reconciliation or mediation services either because they have already accessed these services to no avail, or things seem beyond reconciliation.

Early interventions with couples and families who have not yet developed significant levels of distress have shown promise for effective long term prevention (Behrens & Sanders, 1994, Halfweeg & Markman, 1988, and Sanders & Markie-Dadds, 1992, cited in Nicholson et al, 1996). This highlights the need for strategies and community building initiatives in early intervention and prevention for families who are having difficulties with parenting; who require some form of social support or assistance; or who are at risk of problems becoming extreme; that encourages them to seek help prior to situations resulting in family breakdown (Tomison, 1999).

It would be useful to examine ways in which relationship building can be enhanced to maintain young people's engagement with their families. Further research into successful early intervention may help define the focus of Centrelink's intervention and service provision to young people and those families experiencing breakdown (Healy & Richmond, 1999). Early intervention and prevention strategies could then be identified and implemented targeting families with teenage children, with an objective of reducing the rate of extreme family breakdown, as prevention is both economically and socially more inexpensive than endeavouring to deal with the short and long-term effects of family breakdown once it has occurred (Tomison, 1999; McKay et al, 2000).

### **Australia's Cultural Context**

Definitions of who is part of family vary across cultures and impacts on the circle of people considered important in resolving family issues (Disney et al, 1996). Post war immigration has been the greatest source of cultural diversity in Australia, with over 5.5 million people from as many as 170 countries migrating to Australia since 1945. According to the Australian Bureau of statistics, in 1995 77 percent of the population were born in Australia and 23 percent were born overseas. Our indigenous population constitutes 1.7 percent of the total Australian population, of which 2.1 percent are Torres Strait Islander people (Kolar & Soriano, 2000).

Cross cultural awareness has improved, but a recent report on the use of family and relationship services in Australia entitled 'Partner's in Any Language' (Stoyles, 1995, cited in Disney et al, 1996), made recommendations to ensure access and cultural appropriateness of services. A challenge for family and relationship support services in Australia is to recognise the needs of the indigenous community. Family is a fundamental part of Aboriginal communities, and it is essential to take the cultural diversity of Australian communities into account in family relationships research (Disney et al, 1996).

### **Family and Social Issues**

Evidence indicates that a number of recurring themes underlie the conflict which leads to extreme family breakdown. Children from single-parent families, or whose birth parents separate are at increased risk of adverse educational, health and behavioural outcomes compared with those from similar backgrounds in unbroken two-parent families. Adjustment in step-families appears to be more complicated than in first marriages as children re-entering two-parent families are likely to experience additional family instability. Re-partnering of one or both of the parents involves greater relationship complexity than for couples in first marriages and requires readjustments for the young person about which they may have little or no choice (Baker, 2001; Furstenburg, et al, 1987, Cocket and Tripp, 1994, and Funder, 1996, p201 cited in Baker, 2001; Bessant and Wafts, 1999; Nicholson et al, 1996; Nicholson et al, 1998; Disney et al, 1996). Research has found the prevalence of physical abuse to be twice as high in single-parent families than two-parent households (Tomison, 1996), and abusiveness and alcoholism have been found to both reflect and impact on the dynamics of the entire family. Therefore, if one member's life is interrelated with the lives of other family members, dealing with the individual's issues may involve working with the entire family on how it relates and functions (Baker, 2001).

Other problems may be introduced by continuing pressure from the former spouse, or prolonged hostility between formerly married people. Old relationships are disturbed, new ones involving another adult and often other children are established, and family members may live in several different households. Additionally, children who live with their mothers after separation or divorce are likely to experience reduced contact with their father and suffer distress from this loss. The children of never married mothers are likely to spend their childhood in one or more step-families, which are often conflictual. These factors may account in part for higher rates in behavioural issues (Baker, 2001; Furstenburg, et al, 1987; Cocket and Tripp, 1994; and Funder 1996, p201 cited in Baker, 2001; Bessant and Watts, 1999; Nicholson et al, 1996; Nicholson et al, 1998). Nearly half of all children experiencing a single-parent family followed by remarriage are likely to see the disruption of the second family before they reach the age of sixteen (Elder, 1998), and for some children the consequences of those disruptions continue into adulthood (Baker, 2001).

### **Early Intervention and Prevention**

Parenting has always been about the socialisation, care and development of children as future adults. The parents of today are faced with a complex and challenging set of responsibilities that are very different from those experienced by their own mothers and fathers. They are now responsible for their children's intellectual, social and emotional

well-being (Halford, 2000; McKay et al, 2000). Most parents learn as they go along by drawing on experiences with their own parents, information they have read or what they have seen other parents do. Although parenting styles are different, children and the community expect parents to have a common goal of raising healthy, happy, well adjusted, responsible adults who will respect others and possess the ability to cope with life's difficulties (Child and Youth Health Parenting SA, 2001; Kolar and Soriano, 2000).

The most common themes associated with marital breakdown are:

- Unemployment and work related issues;
- High risk factors within marriages eg addictive behaviours, chronic illness, or death of a child; blended families; marriage and relationship breakdown in the extended family; redefinition of gender roles and equality; growth of individualism; poor communication skills; poor parenting skills; domestic violence; and social isolation.

These factors have a negative effect on the care and mental health of children and suggest that community support systems are less available now than in the past (Zubrick and Silburn et al, 1995 and 1996, cited in ABS, 2001).

It is often forgotten that parenting does not occur in a social vacuum, and is not only affected by individual parent characteristics, but is heavily influenced by the wider social, economic and political context at any given time. These complex variables and other factors such as access to support networks and the nature of the 'marital' relationship, interact to affect parenting methods and outcomes for children. They can make it difficult to deal with any given circumstance when they occur and should things go wrong it is easy to blame parents for the breakdown (Kolar and Soriano, 2000; Mehigan, 2002).

Additionally, parental authority is increasingly shared with television, siblings, day care, teachers and the peer group, so it cannot be assumed that parental influence is the only important one in the lives of children. As non-family members increasingly care for children during working hours, parents may lose more influence in the socialisation process in the future (Baker, 2001). Social problems can affect families even when one or both parents are loving, nurturing and supportive and it is even more difficult for families with mental health issues or that have special needs (Kolar and Soriano, 2000; Mehigan, 2002).

Prevention is both economically and socially more inexpensive than endeavouring to deal with the short and long-term effects of family breakdown once it has occurred. Although it is imperative that governments and services work with those families already experiencing abuse and neglect, a focus on prevention and early intervention could reduce the possibility of abuse, neglect and breakdown in all families (Tomison, 1999). This highlights how essential it is for parents to have easy access to the knowledge and resources that can support them in this role (McKay et al, 2000; Child and Youth Health Parenting SA, 2001; Halford, 2000). Early intervention and prevention has the potential to address and overcome a range of potential issues through well designed early interventions, and has been a key shift in social policy in recent years. An essential basis to the government's current approach in family policy is to view all families in context, which includes the functions that they perform; the health and sufficiency of social networks surrounding the family; economic circumstances and opportunities that enable

social and economic participation; and choices about other aspects of family life (McKay et al, 2000).

The occurrence of underlying social issues such as poverty, mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, unemployment and a lack of social supports can result in abuse and neglect within families and lead to breakdown. Research that identifies the issues faced by families will inform those professionals that support families in trouble. There is a strong need to develop programs for assisting families in dealing with the challenges they face. An early intervention and prevention strategy requires a family-focussed and 'whole of community' approach (Tomison & Tucci, 1997). Therefore, the development and strengthening of partnerships between professionals and agencies involved with families, and the community, is a fundamental component of any strategy in working towards early intervention and prevention of family breakdown (Tomison, 1999). Effective programs for preventing the development of problems for families that limited tertiary interventions cannot provide are essential. Previous research indicates that a variety of strategies are required, both universal and selective, using different approaches to ensure the participation of parents and families who are socioeconomically disadvantaged or who are experiencing problems with their adolescents (Nicholson et al, 1996).

An approach currently advocated by professionals and community groups is the enhancement of educational programs in primary and secondary schools that promotes an education system that takes more responsibility for shaping the members of our society into responsible and capable human beings. In terms of early intervention and prevention this means running compulsory protective behaviour and uniform life skills programs in schools (Tomison, 1996). Education and schools are a critical element in any early intervention and prevention approach for children and young people as schools are also key first-to-know agencies in any network of services for young people. However, some of the major problems for early intervention and prevention approaches are caused by a lack of resources available in other services and agencies in the network, particularly in regards to mental health services (Evans & Shaver, 2001).

### **Examples of Assistance Available to Families**

Relationships Australia looks to researchers to support the importance of recognising the pressures which families experience and to work in partnership towards better paths of resolution through influencing family policy and enhanced service provision (Disney et al, 1996). In the Twin Cities region, Relationships Australia offers many family education courses and sessions for programs for parents and families within their 'Family Support Service'. This is a free service targeting parents and care providers with children aged 0-17 that aims to strengthen the capacity of families in a positive manner and meet the challenges of life transitions and family dislocations. Centacare offers a parent support group and parenting programs aimed at helping to improve family relationships with participants setting the program on topics of their choice.

Parenting SA is an initiative of the Government of South Australia designed to promote the value of parents and to improve the quality of parenting. It aims to recognise the importance of the demanding role of parenting; promote the status of parenthood and the importance of good parenting practices in caring for children; encourage parents to seek support in difficult times and support them in building on their knowledge, confidence and skills. Parenting SA is committed to ensuring that parenting information

is based on the latest research and best practice (Child and Youth Health Parenting SA, 2002). Other information and resources similar to Parenting SA can be accessed from the Internet, such as government and community sites. They provide information and resources to help parents and children with everyday family issues and are practical and easy to use. Most libraries provide Internet access to help those people that do not have this access at home for example: [www.community.gov.au](http://www.community.gov.au) and [www.kids.nsw.gov.au](http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au).

The Young Families Support Service aims to assist young families and young people, partnered or single up to the age of 25 who are entering parenthood. The service is funded by the Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS) through the Stronger Families Fund and has a strong Action Research focus. Support is offered using an holistic approach, recognising that each person or family will require a different level of assistance that is tailored to suit individual needs. Assistance includes help with issues around parenting; accessing childcare; developing and strengthening social networks and links with the community; counselling and support; assessment and referral; and identifying and achieving goals. The service currently facilitates two groups: the 'Preparation for Parenthood' group, and the 'Young Parents Group', and a self sustaining play group has stemmed from the service. (Young Families Support Service, 2002)

### **Methodology:**

**Stage One** - Statistical Analysis System (SAS) run and analysis of UTLAH customers in the Twin Cities

A SAS run analysis of all current UTLAH customers in the Twin Cities / Thuri ngowa region was conducted to ascertain the number, age, gender, geographic distribution, and living arrangements of current UTLAH customers in area. Following the SAS run, a systematic random sample of 50 customers aged from 15 to 17 was taken from the total of 146 UTLAH customers in the Twin Cities region.

The assessment procedures for claimants at the UTLAH rate require a Centrelink social worker to interview the claimant and obtain the views of parents/guardians and independent third parties on the family situation in relation to the unreasonable to live at home criteria. All of the social work reports for the sample of 50 were examined to collect data on the factors that were reported as leading to extreme family breakdown.

A spreadsheet was created using details gathered from each of the cases' Centrelink customer record. Information included in the spreadsheet featured numbers representing gender, age, job seeker or student status, family composition, factors reported as contributing to extreme family breakdown, previous separations from the family, mediation and changes in family composition from each report.

### **Stage Two - Literature Review**

Information that identified the nature of families in Australia today and reported on the factors leading to family breakdown was examined. This included the findings of previous research, journal articles, texts and online information. Past and present early intervention and prevention strategies were also examined to gauge what education, information, training and support are currently used in practise in early intervention and prevention with families.

By determining the effectiveness of previous and current early intervention and prevention strategies, it could inform practice or pinpoint recommendations for future programs, training information and support in the area of early intervention and prevention that could be useful for parents and families and those people working with them for workers in practice.

### **Stage Three - In-depth Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with eight professionals working in the Twin Cities in the fields of counselling, intervention, mediation and education with families and young people either as the whole family or on an individual basis (see Appendix 2 for the questions asked). Four workers were employed in government departments and four were from non government organisations.

### **Results/Findings:**

#### **Gender and Age Groups**

The total number of UTLAH customers at the time of the SAS run was 146, comprising ninety females (61.6%) and fifty-six males (38.4%). This is comparable to the sample of fifty used for this research of 32 females (64%) and 18 males (36%). Gender numbers were then identified in each age group category.

Table 1 **Gender by Age of Young People**

Age Group	Male	Female	Total	%
15	4	5	9	18
16	5	16	21	42
17	9	11	20	40

#### **Family Composition**

At the time of extreme family breakdown, forty-four percent (22) of the families were headed by single-parent, thirty-two percent (16) were two-parent families, eighteen percent (9) were step/blended families and six percent (3) were other family types. The category of "Other" included one young person where both parents had deceased, one young person who had been living with extended family members, and one where the young person had been living in foster care. Four (4) of the families headed by a single parent at the time of the extreme family breakdown had previously been step/blended families.

#### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Customers**

Ten percent of the UTLAH customers identified themselves as either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

#### **Factors leading to extreme family breakdown**

#### **Domestic and Family Violence / severe family conflict**

Domestic and family violence has been identified as a significant factor contributing to the family breakdown by Centrelink Social Workers during the unreasonable to live at home assessment process. The family conflict in these families has been present for at

least 6 months; attempts at counselling or mediation have often been tried and have been unsuccessful in resolving the difficulties; and the conflict has been verified by an independent third party. The family conflict could include either alleged physical violence; verbal abuse; emotional abuse; sexual abuse or a combination of these. In some assessments, a Restraining Order or previous domestic violence incidents are cited.

The data on the 32 families in which domestic and family violence was significant indicates that of these 32 families, 24 experienced physical abuse; 22 experienced verbal abuse; 11 experienced emotional abuse and 1 young person experienced sexual abuse.

In 8 families, domestic and family violence with siblings was identified as a factor contributing to the family breakdown.

In 10 families, emotional, verbal and physical abuse was identified together. In 3 families a history of domestic violence is identified but what type of abuse is not specified. This is also the case in the family where a Restraining Order was in place (type of abuse not identified).

### **Mental Health Issues**

Mental health issues were the second highest reported factor contributing to extreme family breakdown, with a total of thirteen families experiencing these issues. Single-parent and two-parent families shared a total of five incidences each, and there were three reported cases within step/blended families. Of those families reporting mental health issues as a factor, fifty percent of mental health issues were experienced by a parent and fifty percent were experienced by the young person. One family reported that mental health issues were affected both the parent and the young person, and there was one young person reported to have issues of self-harming behaviours.

### **Juvenile Justice and Court Issues:**

This was identified as a factor in thirteen families.

### **Drug and/or Alcohol Issues**

Drug and/or alcohol was the third highest reported factor contributing to extreme family breakdown. Ten out of the fifty families reported drug and/alcohol issues, with the highest of five cases occurring within single-parent families, three cases in two-parent families, and the lowest incidence rate of drug and/or alcohol issues occurred within step/blended families. In eight of the families it was reported that the parent had drug/alcohol issues, and there were two instances of it being the young person.

### **Marital Problems**

In nine families the parents had experienced marital problems prior to extreme family breakdown. The highest incidence of six occurred within two-parent families, followed by two reported cases each for step/blended and single-parent families.

### **Educational Factors**

Problems with education contributing to family breakdown were identified in eight families. It included suspensions from schools and where young people had left school.

**Other Issues**

The remaining issues reported by the families as factors in the lead up to family breakdown were accommodation (4), and other (3).

**Multiple Factors:**

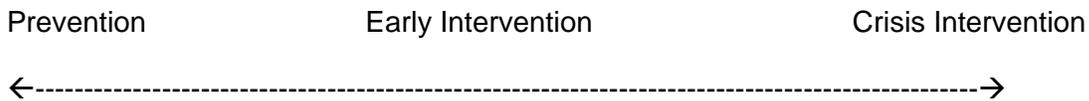
In a number of families, more than one factor was present at the time of family breakdown. In four families, four factors were concurrently identified as contributing to the family breakdown. In 9 families, three factors were concurrently identified as contributing to the family breakdown. In 23 families, two factors were identified as contributing to the family breakdown. In 13 families, one factor was present. In one family, none of these factors were identified as contributing to the family breakdown.

**In-depth Interviews with Professionals**

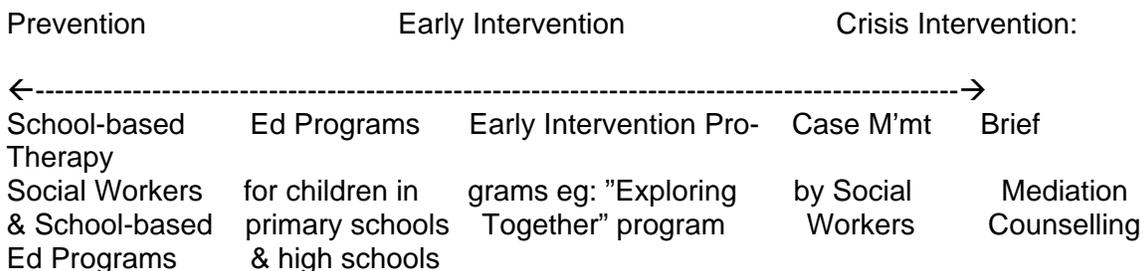
**Models of Intervention**

The interviews conducted with eight professionals working in various agencies in the Twin Cities revealed several models of crisis intervention, early intervention and prevention currently in use. These could be viewed at different points along a continuum from intervention after a crisis or incident at one end, to preventative strategies at the other end of the continuum. Five models of intervention are described below:

**The Intervention / Prevention Continuum:**



Three of the professionals interviewed work in agencies or services involved in intervention after a crisis or after a family or school had identified problems. One service offered an early intervention program to families experiencing early issues which took a holistic approach by involving teachers, parents and children in the program. Two services conducted prevention and educational programs. These prevention strategies could also be considered part of early intervention. On the continuum, these are represented as:



for parents &  
children

The crisis intervention strategies used included counselling, mediation and support for young people and families where the young person is at risk of leaving home or where the young person is already living independently. One service provided 'Brief Intensive Therapy' for families where problems have already been identified. The preferred method was to use a holistic approach involving the whole family rather than identifying any particular member as having "the problem".

Another service would like to see a whole of government co-ordinated approach to the case management of identified children and young people experiencing problems. The suggestion was that the case manager should be a Social Worker who did not represent any of the government departments that are often involved with families such as Health, Family Services or Education. It was identified that Social Workers have the necessary skills and knowledge base to be the most suitable professional for this role.

The professionals interviewed found that parents in all types of families, not of one predominant family composition type, experienced difficulties with 15-17 year olds. The most commonly identified factors contributing to family breakdown included communication problems; poverty; aggressive behaviour; mental illness; conflict with and dislike of new partner/step-parent; and a variety of other factors.

One early intervention program that has successfully operated in Townsville and Victoria is the 'Exploring Together Program' This program is an early intervention program for families with children aged 6-12 years who have emotional and behavioural problems. One parent must be willing to attend an 8 or 10 week program at the same time as the child. The program includes a Children's Group, a Parent's Group, a Combined Group, Partner Evenings and Teacher Meetings. Another service offers educational programs for children in schools as a prevention strategy. The program covers themes such as "Love and Care"; "What is a good relationship?"; "Virtues" and "Ethics and Choices". An important component of the program is to involve the whole classroom - not just those children who may have been identified as having 'problems' or are seen as being the 'trouble makers'.

Another service afforded a school based social work position which made the social worker familiar to the students and part of the normal school environment. As a result of the social worker being known to the students, there were no barriers to gaining support or easily accessing the service. The social worker also provided education at Year 8 camps on topics such as tolerance, cultural awareness, communication, self esteem, assertiveness and conflict resolution; and furthermore was in a position within the school to observe trends and respond to identified needs in the school community. For example, it was noticed that there was a need for conducting a grief support group for students who were experiencing similar issues.

## **Findings discussion:**

The research of Healy and Thomson found young people in blended families to be the most significant family group experiencing extreme family breakdown. This research does not support that finding.

The data analysed in this sample indicates that whilst the single-parent family group was slightly larger in this sample, families across the board, whether single-parent, two natural parent or step / blended, experience family breakdown with 15 - 17 year olds. A number of the single parent families in this study had previously been step / blended families (4 families). Two significant factors contributing to the breakdown included domestic and family violence and mental health issues. Whilst addressing the prevalence of family violence in the Australian community and also ensuring support for families with mental health issues could have an impact on family breakdown, the focus of this research has been to look at what preventative or early intervention strategies could assist all families (families in general). It appears that support and education for both parents and young people would be of benefit.

The literature and interviews with professionals suggest that the opportunity to offer prevention strategies to all families, not only to those identified as "at risk" or where problems have already occurred, could provide the best outcomes for families in the prevention of family breakdown. The preferred models of successful prevention strategies would be offering school based educational programs for all parents offered through the schools as a normal part of the information offered to parents in the school community and offering school based programs to children and young people. These could build on the information and support usually offered to parents of infants and children under 5 years of age.

Considering the evidence that the occurrence of underlying social issues have been found to result in abuse and neglect within families, leading to family breakdown, early intervention and prevention strategies require a family-focussed and 'whole of community' approach. Therefore, the development and strengthening of partnerships between professionals and agencies involved with families and the community should be a fundamental component of any strategy for achieving positive results in early intervention and the prevention of family breakdown (Tomison & Tucci, 1997; Tomison 1999; Halford et al, 2000).

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, school based information and / or educational sessions for parents and similar educational sessions for students from Primary to High School could be one strategy in strengthening all families. Social workers have been identified as appropriately skilled professionals to provide such programs to parents and children in schools. The social workers could be employed by school communities or could be social workers in the local community who have an interest in prevention and education programs in schools. They could also offer early intervention in an environment that is neutral and familiar to families. Furthermore, information or educational strategies that target whole communities and engage families (both parents and their children) and schools before family relationships are in difficulty and at crisis point would have greater impact and a greater likelihood to successfully prevent family breakdown.

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## **Appendix 1.**

### **Questions for professionals about Early Intervention and Prevention Strategies when working with families**

1. Of the young people and families who are your clients/customers/consumers, what are the most common family types (eg single-parent, blended, two-parent)?
2. What are the most common contributing factors to family breakdown?
3. What interventions have been helpful in family conflict situations or with families who are at risk of experiencing breakdown between the 'parent/s' and the young person?
4. If you had unlimited resources, what would you implement to prevent family breakdown?
5. Do you have other ideas for early intervention and prevention strategies, or are you aware of any other successful family breakdown prevention programs?