



THE HIVE, MT DRUITT

Reflections on Barriers for Families in the First 2000 Days

September 2021

What is The Hive?

The Hive is a collective impact initiative comprising of organisations and individuals who are working together in the Western Sydney area of Mt Druitt to ensure all children start school well. The Hive is a backbone team who coordinate place-based, Collective Impact work across The Mt Druitt area with our community development and early childhood focused work.

There are a range of partner organisations and local residents who work collaboratively with The Hive to achieve positive outcomes for children in our community. We believe that if we bring various parts of the system together, listen deeply to community concerns and work together on community and evidence informed solutions we can sustainably improve outcomes for children in this community. The Hive is guided in our early years work by evidence informed key intervention pathways for children aged 0–5 years alongside community voice to promote innovative and community focused solutions.



Our specific areas of work includes:

- An *Early Learning Linker* to support families in overcoming any barriers they are experiencing in accessing early education for their child. This includes working with families to seek information on the various centre options, navigating Centrelink's childcare subsidy process, supporting families to obtain birth certificates for their child, providing brokerage for bonds and supporting families to overcome any other barriers they may be experiencing.
- A *Health Linker* to support families navigate and overcome barriers to support their children who have developmental concerns or delays and connect them to the relevant supports. This includes connecting to paediatricians, allied health services, the NDIS and providing brokerage or transport to access these services.
- The *Check Ups Before School (CUBS) Program* to support access to developmental health checks and additional supports where required. The Hive have partnered with NSW Health to deliver age appropriate developmental checks of children aged 0–5 years, utilizing trusted relationships and place-based assets such as preschools, playgroups and community centres to overcome barriers for families of accessing health services.
- *Quality training & professional development* of early education centres to encourage and promote high quality education and care within Mt Druitt centre-based services. This includes establishing an Early Childhood Educators Network in collaboration with Western Sydney University for ongoing professional development and networking opportunities for early educators.
- *Community Development* work in the suburbs of Willmot, Lethbridge Park, Bidwill and Tregar in a Collective Impact framework, to collaboratively work with residents and local stakeholders towards the goal of safe, healthy and child friendly communities, as we acknowledge the range of social determinants that influence childhood development.

What barriers do families face?

Parents and carers in the Mt Druitt community are resilient, strong, and love their children deeply. However, like many families in under resourced communities they face a range of barriers throughout raising their young children. We have captured here the barriers that we have heard from families in Mt Druitt in trying to access services for their young children, considering general barriers, and barriers specific to child development and early education services.

In Mt Druitt, 1 in 3 children start school considered developmentally vulnerable on 2 or more AEDC domains

<https://www.aedc.gov.au/>

General Barriers:

- Families are often **fearful of services** due to prior negative experiences or the concern that they will be judged for their parenting or will be reported to child protection. This results in families being hesitant to access services for their children.
- Families **lack support and resources** around how to manage difficult behaviors, understanding the impact of trauma on a child's development and where to go for information on how to best support their child's development.
- **Transport** is a barrier, as not all families have access to a car and public transport is often unreliable and inconsistent. It is also often considered stressful to take children, particularly those with challenging behaviors, on public transport and the financial cost of transporting the family can also be a barrier.
- **Financial stress** is common for families, as accessing various early education or health services often results in a cost through transport, fees, appointments, referrals etc.
- Families in Mt Druitt are often experiencing multiple **family stressors** such as financial stress, domestic violence, substance abuse, poverty etc. Families often express they do not have the mental capacity to "do anything extra" for their kids, reflecting the 'survival mode' families are operating within.
- **Lack of access to free helpful resources** or activities such as toys, books, activities, playgroups to support the child's development.

Barriers to Accessing Child Health & Development Services:

- Developmental health checks are a great asset for screening for delays, however, the purpose of the Blue Book checks is not clear to local families, and these checks are often not completed after the first few months. Families often confuse getting their child's immunizations at a GP is the same as a developmental check.
- Families who do know about the Blue Book checks are not sure where they can access them, or if they do know, the location is not often nearby to families and transport can be a barrier.
- Families are often not aware of what can be done at home to support a child's developmental areas at different ages, or where they can turn to for information.
- The wait times for community health allied health services such as speech therapy or counselling is extensive with often over a 12 month wait, and private services also have extensive waitlists and are expensive.
- The NDIS process for children under 7 years is often misunderstood, and families are not always aware if their child is eligible or how they can apply for the scheme.
- There are limited bulk billing paediatricians in the Mt Druitt area, and all have extensive waitlists. Families and early educators have reflected that children have been diagnosed and medicated without an exploration of family history or trauma, and without information about additional supports or how to support parents after the diagnosis.
- Maternal nurses are great sources of information regarding local community health care centres, blue books and other local supports. However families with newborns have often visited their GP before a maternal nurse calls offering the optional home visit, and at this stage families feel their needs are met with their GP and often decline the home visit which loses the chance to receive this information.



Barriers to Accessing Early Education Services:

- The cost of a childcare bond is often too expensive for parents in Mt Druitt to afford. While daily fees are subsidized and manageable for families, the bond is calculated at the full un-subsidized rate which means hundreds or thousands of dollars would be required from parents to confirm the enrolment. Some long day care centres have quoted \$2000 to enrol two children in the centre for five days a week. This is unaffordable for majority of families in the community.
- There is a misconception that the quoted fees are the full fee required from families and families are not always aware that subsidies are available, which can deter a family from continuing with an enrolment.
- The Child Care Subsidy process is often overwhelming for families and this can be considered “too hard” and prevent families from considering childcare.
- There is limited access to information about the childcare enrolment process, and understanding which subsidies families are entitled to.
- Families are overwhelmed in how to complete the forms and required documents. The process can be complicated and families can get overwhelmed, particularly if literacy is also a concern.
- Children often don’t have a birth certificate or weren’t registered at birth which is a requirement for enrolment in any child care service. Many families are not confident with the process of registering a child or applying for a birth certificate, and the process is complex. Technological barriers also prevent families from completing the application online, as well as the cost for the birth certificate
- Sustaining an enrolment can be challenging due to wider concerns in the family unit which can result in arrears, financial stress and the child losing their place at the service. A family is not often aware or informed of the financial hardship options to help sustain the enrolment, and centres are not always trauma-informed or motivated to assist the family.
- Parents and carers are often anxious of sending their child to childcare centres due to separation concerns, behavioural concerns, toilet training etc. and are not aware of the support child cares can provide with these.
- There can be a lack of knowledge of the importance of preschool for a child or knowledge of when they should start attending preschool. There is a common belief that education begins when child starts Kindergarten.

What have we found that works for families?

Accessible and place-based solutions

Mt Druitt families can experience multiple stressors and therefore services should be locally available to overcome transport barriers and the lack of knowledge of available services. By being place-based, services can have a deeper understanding of the local context and ensure services meet family's needs.

Collaborate with local stakeholders and families

Historically, many organisations have come and gone leaving family's distrustful of services, questioning their intentions and how long they will stick around. Organisations should authentically collaborate with and listen to existing organisations and local families to build trust within the community. This can aid in word-of-mouth referrals as families can speak of their experience. Partnership also provides the opportunity to offer holistic supports to families through partnerships with local organisations.

Minimise eligibility criteria

Families who require support should be able to access services or brokerage with minimal hoops to jump through. Families may stop attempting to access supports if they are repeatedly turned away. If an organisation cannot meet the family's need, they should actively support the family to be connected to the appropriate service who can help.

Family focused, flexible and holistic

Services need to acknowledge the trauma and mistrust of services that families may hold and proactively offer additional supports to overcome certain barriers such as providing transport, assisting to fill in paperwork, and offering various options of communication such as texts or emails. Providing childcare or spaces to meet with children is also important. Staff should be flexible with meeting locations where the family may be comfortable such as parks, the home, McDonald's or community spaces.

Hold a relational focus with families and in all we do

Families want to be treated like families, not clients. Being informal and flexible can help families feel comfortable and be more likely to engage with supports because they feel valued and supported by someone they trust.

Consult with families and receive feedback

Ensure services are contextually appropriate for families in the community and are meeting their needs. Be present at local community events or activities to build familiarity and trust while listening and learning. Adapt services when receiving feedback or to meet local needs.

Ensuring all children get the best outcomes

In addition to the principles previously mentioned, The Hive believe there are actions policy makers, government and non-government organisations can implement to ensure all children can receive the supports they need for their health and development, now and for their future.

General Principles:

- Reduce costs and increase availability and awareness for anything that is considered essential, a protective factor or best practice for children's success, especially in low socioeconomic contexts.
- Increase services, programs and staff available locally in place-based community assets, not in centralized offices.
- Behaviour support is a large concern for families in Mt Druitt with an extraordinary number of children diagnosed with various behavioural disorders or have experienced trauma which impacts emotional regulation. Information and support should be increased for parents about how to manage these behaviours, as well as education about the impacts of trauma, and increasing accessible counselling services for children within schools and services.
- Review the determinants of health and invest in addressing structural factors that contribute to poverty including housing, income, education, and infrastructure.



Early Education Services:

- Simplify the birth certificate and registration process for families with various technology access. Currently families are sent online to register a child however not all families have access to a desktop and multiple issues occur in the phone web browser attempts.
- Embed an Early Learning Linker style role into local government services & childcare centres to promote enrolment of children aged 3&4 years and provide support to overcome barriers.
- Abolish the childcare bond for families considered vulnerable or adapt to a sliding scale system to determine bond amount by family income rather than full day fee calculation.
- Ensuring early childhood educators have extensive training on trauma informed care to both understand and be able to meet the needs of children with challenging behaviours.
- Centre Directors to ensure their approach is human-centered and trauma-informed when working with families in all their practices. Such as offering flexibility in payment options, educating parents on financial hardship options and collaborating with other community services to support the family.

Child Health & Development Services:

- The First 2000 Days Framework (NSW Ministry of Health, 2019) discusses tiers of support regarding child health care. We would suggest that populations experiencing higher rates of disadvantage should be offered the Level 2 “extra care for those who need it” at a universal support level, to reduce families falling through the cracks and ensuring additional supports are available easily.
- Embed child & maternal health services and allied health services as locally available & place-based as possible to overcome barriers and increase engagement of at risk families.
- Increase allied health staff to reduce community health waitlists, and provide interim support or information to families in the wait time.
- A smoother transition from the maternal health system to the child & family health system to prevent disengagement through an optional home visit. Provide stronger information at the hospitals about purpose of blue books, the purpose and location of the Community Health Centre and support to link to this Centre in case families do not receive this information at the optional maternal nurse home visit.
- Education campaigns and free resources for families about how to support their child’s development at various stages.
- GP’s to offer greater support and information to families with new babies about community health centres and child development information.
- Paediatricians & child and family health nurses trained in trauma informed care and adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and positive childhood experiences (PCES) screening tools.

Final word

The Hive, Mt Druitt collaborates with local stakeholders, families, policymakers, government and non-government organisations to reach the goal of all children in Mt Druitt starting school well.

We recognise families and children need many different supports, opportunities and resources to encourage positive childhood development. However, not all children in Mt Druitt have access to these supports which means their development can suffer. The Hive works holistically across the ecosystem to ensure all determinants of health and wellbeing are constructive building blocks for a child's present and future.

What we have documented in this report are reflections from Hive staff from their experiences working with Mt Druitt families, and seeing the many barriers that they have to navigate to access quality services for their child. We share these barriers and our reflections of what positive changes could be made in the hopes that policy makers and organisations can learn from our experience, and work towards breaking down barriers and implementing changes to ensure all children can start school well.

We welcome collaborations with any policymakers, organisations or local families who want to partner with us on this journey.



Acknowledgements

The Hive acknowledges that our staff live across many unceded Aboriginal lands, with The Hive engaged in deep work on Darug Country. We acknowledge the custodians whose knowledge, cultures and customs have nurtured, and continue to nurture land and peoples since the dreaming. We pay our respects to Elders, past and present and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples whom we work alongside. We endeavour to work together as one to strengthen local communities and we respect the cultures and traditions of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We commit to the journey of reconciliation, admitting we may not always get it right, but approach the process with open and humble hearts, and the intention to do better.

Compiled by Laura Faraj (*Child Health Project Lead*) along with insights from the broader The Hive team.

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