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**Suggested Citation**


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GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS USED THROUGHOUT THIS REPORT

**CfC Initiative:** The national *Communities for Children* initiative.

**CfC Site:** The Murwillumbah *Communities for Children* program.

**CfC Strategy:** One of the five primary strategies of the Murwillumbah CfC site.

**CfC Activities:** Components within one of the Murwillumbah site’s five CfC strategies.

**Community Consultative Committee** An interagency advisory group which oversaw all aspects of the Murwillumbah CfC site’s activities.

**Facilitating Partner:** YWCA NSW - contracted by the Australian Government as the lead agency responsible for delivering the Murwillumbah CfC.

**Community Partner:** An organisation contracted to deliver one of the Murwillumbah CfC site’s strategies.

**Worker:** Refers primarily to those working within early childhood services but can also include others working with young children in whole-family focussed services, particularly when discussed at a strategy-level.

**Community Survey:** Community-level survey of families with children aged 0-5 years conducted in May 2007 (initial) and May 2009 (followup).

**ECS Survey:** Community-level survey of families with children aged 3-5 years conducted in April-May 2007 (initial) and November-December 2007 (followup).

**Worker Survey:** Community-level survey of workers in the 10 preschools or day care services conducted in April-May 2007 (initial) and November-December 2007 (followup).

**CCYP:** Southern Cross University's *Centre for Children and Young People* - The Local Evaluator for the Murwillumbah CfC site.

**EC:** Early Childhood - Relating to children aged 0-5 years.

**ECS:** Early Childhood Service - One of the 10 preschool or day care services in the Murwillumbah CfC site.

**FaHCSIA:** Australian Government’s Department of Families, Housing, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs - The funding body for the national *Communities for Children* initiative.

**PALS:** Playing And Learning to Socialise program - A CfC activity within the *Ready For School* strategy.

**RFS:** Ready For School - One of the site’s five CfC strategies.

**SFCS:** Stronger Families and Communities Strategy - the broader FaHCSIA initiative through which the CfC initiative was funded.

**STC:** Save the Children (Australia) - The Community Partner responsible for the *Our Baby and Parent Education & Support* strategies.

**TVECIS:** Tweed Valley Early Childhood Intervention Service - The Community Partner responsible for the *Ready For School* strategy.
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The full version of this report can be accessed through the following weblink:

[Early Childhood & Family Program Evaluations](#)
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

The Communities for Children (CfC) initiative was a major component of the Australian government’s 2004-09 Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS), which aimed to:

- help families and communities build better futures for children;
- build family and community capacity;
- support relationships between families and the communities they live in; and
- improve communities’ ability to help themselves.

The SFCS sought to improve early childhood outcomes, in keeping with the National Agenda for Early Childhood’s five evidence-based priority areas: healthy young families; supporting families and parents; early learning and care; child-friendly communities; and family and children’s services working effectively as a system (Social Policy Research Centre, 2005).

The CfC initiative provided large-scale funding for socioeconomically-disadvantaged communities across Australia. Within each site, the funding was given to a Facilitating Partner organisation who was required to work in partnership with other local organisations, including an independent Local Evaluator, in order to plan, develop, implement and evaluate locally-relevant strategies to improve outcomes for children aged 0-5 years, their families and those working with them. This “Facilitating Partner” model represented an innovative and very different way of delivering services, for the government funding body and for the mostly non-government organisations receiving the funding.

ABOUT MURWILLUMBAH

Murwillumbah, in far north-eastern New South Wales, was one of the 45 communities across Australia selected to receive funding through the CfC initiative: $1.6 million over four years (2005-09). The CfC site boundaries were those of the 2484 postcode area, which comprises the Murwillumbah township and over 50 surrounding villages.

The 2005 community planning phase indicated that the site was home to about 16,000 residents, representing a diverse range of people and communities, including a Hare Krishna community, a Sikh community, multiple occupancies communities and ‘conservative’ farming communities. Based on the 2001 Census (the latest available at the time):

- 1-2% identified as Aboriginal;
- 17% were born outside Australia, most commonly in the United Kingdom or New Zealand;
- 8½% lived in households where a language other than English was spoken;
- 13% were unemployed, almost double the Australian average at the time;
- 91% lived in a house, with almost half owning it outright;
- 30% had a post-school qualification; and
- 90% had lived in that Statistical Local Area for over five years (ABS, 2005; YWCA NSW, 2006).

The Murwillumbah CfC site included 2,672 families with children (30% being single-parent families) receiving a median weekly income of $600-699 and paying a median weekly rent or mortgage of $125-175. These families included 1,249 children aged 0-5 years old, representing almost 8% of the CfC site’s total population (ABS, 2005; YWCA NSW, 2006).
YWCA NSW was selected as the Facilitating Partner for the Murwillumbah CfC site. This involved them facilitating a collaborative six-month community planning and literature review process, which resulted in the following comprehensive Community Action Plan for achieving the CfC site’s vision of supporting its children to have the best possible start in life. As summarised below, this site Plan involved five CfC strategies targeting the SFCS’s five priority areas and featuring 12 main activities which overlapped and intertwined towards achieving the site’s 10 overall goals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CfC Site Vision</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Murwillumbah will support its children to have the best possible start in life so that they arrive at school happy, healthy and ready to learn</em></td>
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<th>SFCS Priorities</th>
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<td>Healthy Young Families</td>
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<td>Supporting Families &amp; Parents</td>
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<td>Early Learning &amp; Care</td>
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<td>Child-Friendly Communities</td>
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<td>Family &amp; Children’s Services Work Effectively as a System</td>
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<th>CfC Site Strategies</th>
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<td>Our Baby</td>
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<td>Parent Education &amp; Support</td>
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<td>Ready For School</td>
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<td>Murwillumbah, Child-Friendly Community</td>
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<td>Murwillumbah Working Together</td>
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<th>CfC Site Activities</th>
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<td>Support parents from villages to access ante &amp; postnatal services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access &amp; distribute ante &amp; postnatal resources</td>
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<td>Parenting education, training &amp; support</td>
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<td>Access for parents to attend seminars/forums</td>
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<td>Parent-friendly resource development</td>
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<td>Develop Inclusion Resource Guide</td>
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<td>Implement Inclusion Resource Guide</td>
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<td>Family resource worker</td>
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<td>Parenting Innovation / Grassroots Fund</td>
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<td>Family Week celebration</td>
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<td>Developing early childhood interagency</td>
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<td>Professional development activities</td>
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<th>CfC Site Overall Goals</th>
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<td><strong>For Families</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Improved access to professional support, resources and educational opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Improved access to informal parenting supports and recreational opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Improved parenting knowledge, style, competence and confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Improved community engagement, capacity and leadership around child and family issues</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>For Early Childhood &amp; Family Support Workers &amp; Services</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Improved worker access to professional development opportunities, resources and other supports</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Improved worker knowledge, skills and confidence in their work with young children and their families</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7 Improved communication, collaboration and coordination between early childhood and family support services</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>For Children</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>8 More appropriate, inclusive (of fathers, Aboriginal and culturally-diverse families) and child-friendly services</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Improved access to professional support services and resources</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10 Improved health, wellbeing, behaviour and development (social, emotional and cognitive)</td>
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Community organisations were sub-contracted to develop and implement each CfC strategy:
- Save the Children (Australia) managed the *Our Baby* and *Parent Education & Support* strategies;
- Tweed Valley Early Childhood Intervention Service managed the *Ready For School* strategy; and
- YWCA NSW managed the *Murwillumbah, Child-Friendly Community* and *Murwillumbah Working Together* strategies.

A further 80 local organisations contributed towards planning and/or implementing the activities of these five strategies.

All strategy-level and site-level activities were overseen by YWCA NSW and guided by a Community Consultative Committee including senior members from a broad range of local government and non-government organisations (including the two Community Partner organisations); the regional FaHCSIA representative and the project, regional and state managers from YWCA NSW.
Southern Cross University’s Centre for Children and Young People was appointed as the Local Evaluator for the Murwillumbah CfC site, with responsibility to develop, implement and report on a comprehensive site-level evaluation plan.

This planned CfC site evaluation involved data collected at a community-level and data collected from children, families and workers engaging with each CfC strategy. The community-level evaluation comprised three initial-&-followup surveys which gathered data in relation to the site’s 10 overall goals, with the followup surveys including additional questions to explore families’ and workers’ awareness of and responses to the CfC strategies and activities. The strategy-specific evaluation involved data routinely-collected by those implementing each activity, regarding who participated, how they felt about it and, where relevant, any benefits perceived or demonstrated.

The main report outlines a number of constraints on this CfC site’s evaluation which, ultimately, resulted in less data, and less consistent data, than would have been optimal. Throughout this report, statistical tests are used to explore the meaningfulness of any response changes between the initial and followup surveys and of any differences between sub-groups of those surveyed. The small sample sizes available for some of these comparisons limit the power of this evaluation to detect what may have been “real” changes or differences. Consequently, what appear to be large differences may necessarily be described as “similar”. In order to minimise the likelihood of missing potentially meaningful differences, results in this report are narratively described as higher-lower or more-less when associated statistical testing produced significance (p) values of less than 0.25. Where such descriptive statements are made, relevant statistical test results and significance (p) values are presented in brackets, with grey text indicating currently non-significant but potentially meaningful differences. With all p values (which can range between 0 and 1), smaller numbers indicate larger differences between the groups being compared.

Confidence in the progress being made across the Murwillumbah CfC’s 10 overall goals was strengthened by the diversity of data sources available for many of the goals, the consistency of the messages coming from the different sources and the general comparability of the samples achieved in the initial and followup community-level surveys.
The information presented in the Background section demonstrate that the Murwillumbah CfC has clearly succeeded in engaging a broad diversity of local organisations with planning and implementing a comprehensive array of activities to support the development and wellbeing of local children aged 0-5 years. These CfC activities provided local families with a wide range of information, educational and recreational opportunities, resources and professional support services.

The data presented throughout the Evaluation Findings: Contact, Satisfaction & Perceived Usefulness sections demonstrate that most of these CfC activities have successfully engaged all local early childhood care and education services, most other local child and family support services, many local early childhood and family support workers and hundreds of local families with young children. The limited participant data available suggest that while Murwillumbah CfC’s activities have successfully engaged many families living outside the main township, there may still be room to improve the proportion of fathers and Aboriginal, Sikh and Hare Krishna families being reached.

Where feedback data were available, workers and families engaging with CfC activities generally reported being very satisfied with the information, resources, services or other supports they had received. They also reported having found the CfC activities personally helpful and/or useful and perceived that they had been at least a little helpful for other local families, children and/or early childhood workers. However, there was considerable room for improvement in the nature and consistency of information collected across CfC activities, in terms of participant characteristics and their feedback about the nature and impact of the CfC activities.

The data presented in the Evaluation Findings: CfC Awareness & Familiarity section suggest that many of those engaging with CfC activities, particularly among the families, may not have realised they were provided through the CfC or one of its strategies. This could have resulted in artificially low community-level awareness figures for the Murwillumbah CfC and its strategies. Overall, workers appeared more familiar with the names of the CfC strategies and both families and workers seem to be becoming more familiar with them over time.

As summarised below, the findings presented throughout this report indicate that the Murwillumbah Communities for Children site is making good progress in relation to each of its 10 overall goals:

**Goal 1: Improving families’ access to professional support, resources & education opportunities**

- Hundreds of families have received educational opportunities and professional resources, services and/or referrals that are unlikely to have been available without the CfC.
- At the community-level, families’ access to needed professional parenting resources and/or services may be improving, although up to half of the 14-34 families expressing needs in the followup surveys would still like more professional support than they could currently access.

**Goal 2: Improving families’ access to informal parenting supports & recreation opportunities**

- A variety of previously-unavailable informal parent support and recreational opportunities have been provided for local families, including some community-driven initiatives which have been inspired by CfC activities or events.
- Families’ access to needed informal parenting support may be improving, although one-half of the 23 families responding to the followup Community survey would still like more informal support than they could currently access.
- Mothers may be receiving more informal support from their partners, parents and in-laws.
**Goal 3: Improving Parenting Knowledge, Style, Competence & Confidence**

- Families engaging with CfC strategies have enhanced their understanding about, capacity and confidence to support their children's development and behaviour, their relationships with their children and overall family functioning.
- There has been no community-level change in these indicators, with most families reasonably confident in their understanding about, capacity and confidence to support their children's development and behaviour and rating their parenting as better than average.
- There has also been no change in the proportion of families expressing needs for professional parenting support, information and/or resources, with more than half of the 20-60 families responding to the followup surveys expressing needs for parenting information, resources or education and in relation to supporting their children’s development or behaviour.
- There has also been little change in the proportion of families knowing where they can access their required parenting supports, with the vast majority of responding families knowing where they can get professional support across a wide range of parenting issues.

**Goal 4: Improving Community Engagement, Capacity & Leadership around Child & Family Issues**

- Over 80 local organisations, and their workers, have actively contributed across the many CfC activities, including taking responsibility for the ongoing planning, management and/or delivery of some of them.
- A regional-level early childhood interagency group, involving over 25 child and family support organisations, has been established and is meeting regularly.
- Five new family support activities have been initiated by local families and organisations.

**Goal 5: Improving Workers’ Access to Professional Development, Resources & Other Supports**

- Early childhood and family support workers have received a wide variety of professional development opportunities and support resources and/or services that are unlikely to have been available without the CfC.
- There has been no community-level change in workers’ ability to access resources and services to support children’s development and behaviour, with the 15 workers responding to the followup survey identifying room for improvement in their ability to access such supports.

**Goal 6: Improving Workers’ Knowledge, Skills & Confidence in Their Work with Children & Families**

- Workers having engaged with the Ready For School strategy perceived improvements in:
  - their understanding, skills and confidence in relation to supporting young children’s development and behaviour, especially for children with disabilities or delays;
  - their relationships and ability to work effectively with the children; and
  - their understanding of families’ needs and their relationships with children’s families.
- Despite these perceived improvements, most of the 9-16 workers responding to Sustainability surveys expressed a desire for ongoing support from the RFS specialist support team, except in relation to the PALS program, which workers were now confident to implement independently.
- Where feedback data were available, most workers attending CfC-delivered professional development events reported having found them very relevant or helpful.
- At the community-level, there may have been an increase in workers’ awareness of where to access resources for managing children’s challenging behaviour but there was little change in their awareness of where to access resources and services to support other aspects of young children’s development.
- There were no community-level changes in workers’ perceived knowledge, skills or confidence in relation to supporting children's development and behaviour or in relation to discussing them with children’s families, with most workers rating themselves 6-8 of a possible 10 points across all survey items.
- There were also no community-level changes in families’ ratings of local EC service workers’ performance in these areas, with most families very satisfied and rating the workers at 8-9 of a possible 10 points across all survey items.
**GOAL 7: IMPROVING COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION & COORDINATION BETWEEN SERVICES**

- Very high levels of inter-agency communication, collaboration and cooperation have been achieved across all CfC strategies and activities and seem to be extending into other non-CfC child and family support activities.
- Having an expert facilitator has enhanced satisfaction with and the perceived usefulness of the Murwillumbah Early Childhood Interagency.
- CfC professional development events have enhanced inter-agency communication, collaboration and cooperation, by bringing together workers from different services.

**GOAL 8: MORE APPROPRIATE, INCLUSIVE & CHILD-FRIENDLY SERVICES**

- Most CfC activities were very successful at reaching children and families living outside the Murwillumbah township.
- Where data are available, CfC activities are reaching some fathers and Aboriginal families, although there may be room to further enhance their engagement levels across the full range of CfC strategies and activities.
- It is unknown how well CfC activities are reaching local Sikh and Hare Krishna families.
- Many projects funded through the Parenting Innovation/ Grassroots Fund have enhanced the child-friendliness, age-appropriateness and safety of their spaces, equipment or activities.
- At the community-level, families perceived increased levels of discrimination against families with alternative lifestyles, families from other cultures and Aboriginal families and increased difficulty in finding clean, free toilets or baby-changing areas.

**GOAL 9: IMPROVING CHILDREN’S ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES & RESOURCES**

- Many children have received group-based and/or individualised support from a range of early childhood professionals which is unlikely to have been available otherwise, at least within the timeframes possible through the CfC.
- Many more children are also likely to have benefited, more indirectly, as a result of the wide range of CfC activities aimed at enhancing the knowledge, skills, resources and/or confidence of local early childhood and family support workers.

**GOAL 10: IMPROVING CHILDREN’S HEALTH, WELLBEING, BEHAVIOUR & DEVELOPMENT**

- Children receiving support from the RFS resource worker demonstrated significant improvements in their behaviour and temperament.
- Children receiving the global PALS program demonstrated significant improvements in their social and emotional development.
- At the community-level, EC service workers perceived considerable decreases in the proportion of 3-5 year olds needing additional support with their development and/or behaviour.
- At the community-level, there was also a decrease in the proportion of families expressing concern about their child’s general behaviour but an increase in the proportion expressing concern about their child’s ability to express their feelings.
In light of the findings and limitations discussed above, the following recommendations are offered towards further enhancing the reach and impact of the Murwillumbah CfC’s ongoing implementation:

**Recommendations for the Future**

**Promotion of the CfC**

1) There remains scope for improved community-level promotion of the Murwillumbah CfC and its strategies: good progress is being made with regard to basic awareness but familiarity levels remain quite low for most CfC components, especially among families.

**Strategy Planning & Implementation**

2) The current CfC strategies should continue: they are consistently well-received, perceived as useful by the families and workers accessing them and there remains scope for further improvements in outcomes for local children, families and workers.

3) Ongoing support should be allocated to continue the outreach-style of many CfC activities, which is successfully engaging children and families from outlying villages, with consideration for whether there may be a need for direct service delivery in other communities, including the Sikh and Hare Krishna communities.

4) Consideration should be given to offering additional community family events throughout the year, given the high levels of family and organisational engagement with the annual Family Week event and how well it contributes towards achieving a number of the CfC site’s goals.

5) Another round of community consultation could enhance how well future CfC activities reach the full diversity of children, families and workers within the Murwillumbah CfC site and how well they contribute towards further progress in relation to the site’s 10 overall goals. In particular, additional targeted consultations should be undertaken with any sub-groups of families and workers less engaged with the current CfC strategies and activities.

6) There remains scope to engage more families in identifying and proposing solutions for the remaining child and family issues.

**Evaluation Practices**

7) The consistency and collection of evaluation practices for tracking, summarising and reporting basic participant demographics, feedback and outcomes could be improved across all CfC strategies and activities. While all strategies are evidently engaging and satisfying many families and workers, improved participant data would enable future CfC activities to better target and address the needs of the full diversity of children, families and workers within the Murwillumbah CfC site. This could be facilitated by the development of some key templates: a “Participant Feedback” form to be completed by those attending CfC events, an “Event Overview” form to be completed by strategy workers after each CfC event and a “Resource Log” form to be completed by strategy workers as they distribute CfC resources.

8) Another round of community-level worker and family surveys would provide more current data in relation to the various awareness, familiarity, contact, satisfaction, perceived usefulness and progress data presented throughout this report. Alternative data collection methods should be considered in order to achieve higher participation rates and to ensure samples which are representative of families and workers across the Murwillumbah CfC site.

9) Consideration should be given to gathering more evaluation data directly from children participating in Murwillumbah CfC activities. This would enhance understanding about children’s experiences with & perspectives about the CfC’s strategies & activities. More child-inclusive planning and/or evaluation approaches could also contribute to enhancing children’s outcomes, especially in relation to their self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem.