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Leigh Goodenough and Kathlene Wilson

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# THE FAMILY ZONE: A SCHOOL-BASED MULTI-PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO CHILD AND FAMILY WELLBEING

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Leigh Goodenough<sup>1</sup> and Kathlene Wilson<sup>2</sup>

*<sup>1</sup> Senior Manager Community Development, Lutheran Community Care (former)*

*<sup>2</sup> Lutheran Community Care*

## Abstract

Schools can be vitally important centres of family safety and wellbeing, as evidenced by the Family Zone managed by Lutheran Community Care at Ingle Farm Primary School in northern Adelaide. The co-location of the Family Zone occurred through a lease agreement with the SA Minister of Education, works in close affiliation with school leadership, and is funded through Commonwealth, state, philanthropic and local donor sources. The Family Zone sustains access to health, family wellbeing and child protection services alongside the school and a co-located state-funded Children's Centre. This arrangement offers a case study of a particular model of schools as community hubs. The community benefit of the Family Zone prompts suggestions for policy development to optimise the re-utilisation of existing school facilities and the design and provision of new school-based resources to achieve enhanced community connections and wellbeing.

*Keywords:* Family Zone, family wellbeing, connection, partnerships, re-utilisation, policy

### **The Family Zone: A School based Multi-Partnership Approach to Child and Family Wellbeing**

Schools in Australia are increasingly called upon to support families in diverse ways that exceed their original core purpose of education. In regions experiencing complex socioeconomic disadvantage there is growing recognition that schools are key sites to connect with families that are otherwise difficult for mainstream services to reach. The South Australian Education Department's Schools as Community Hubs initiative has recognised the latent potential of schools as broader community resources (Department for Education and Child Development 2017), and the National Community Hubs Program delivered by Community Hubs Australia has explicitly identified schools as the key service locations for their Hub initiative, recognising the potential for this model to improve community awareness and connections for isolated families, and to support the school readiness, literacy and social confidence of children (Wong, Press and Cumming 2015; Rushton et al 2017).

Schools can become important centres of family safety and wellbeing, as evidenced by the Family Zone managed by Lutheran Community Care at Ingle Farm Primary School in northern Adelaide. The Family Zone is co-located with Ingle Farm Primary School through a lease agreement with the SA Minister of Education, works in close affiliation with school leadership, and is funded through Commonwealth, state, philanthropic and local donor sources. The Family Zone sustains access to health (WHO 1948), family wellbeing (AIHW 2015) and child protection services alongside the school and a co-located state-funded Children's Centre.

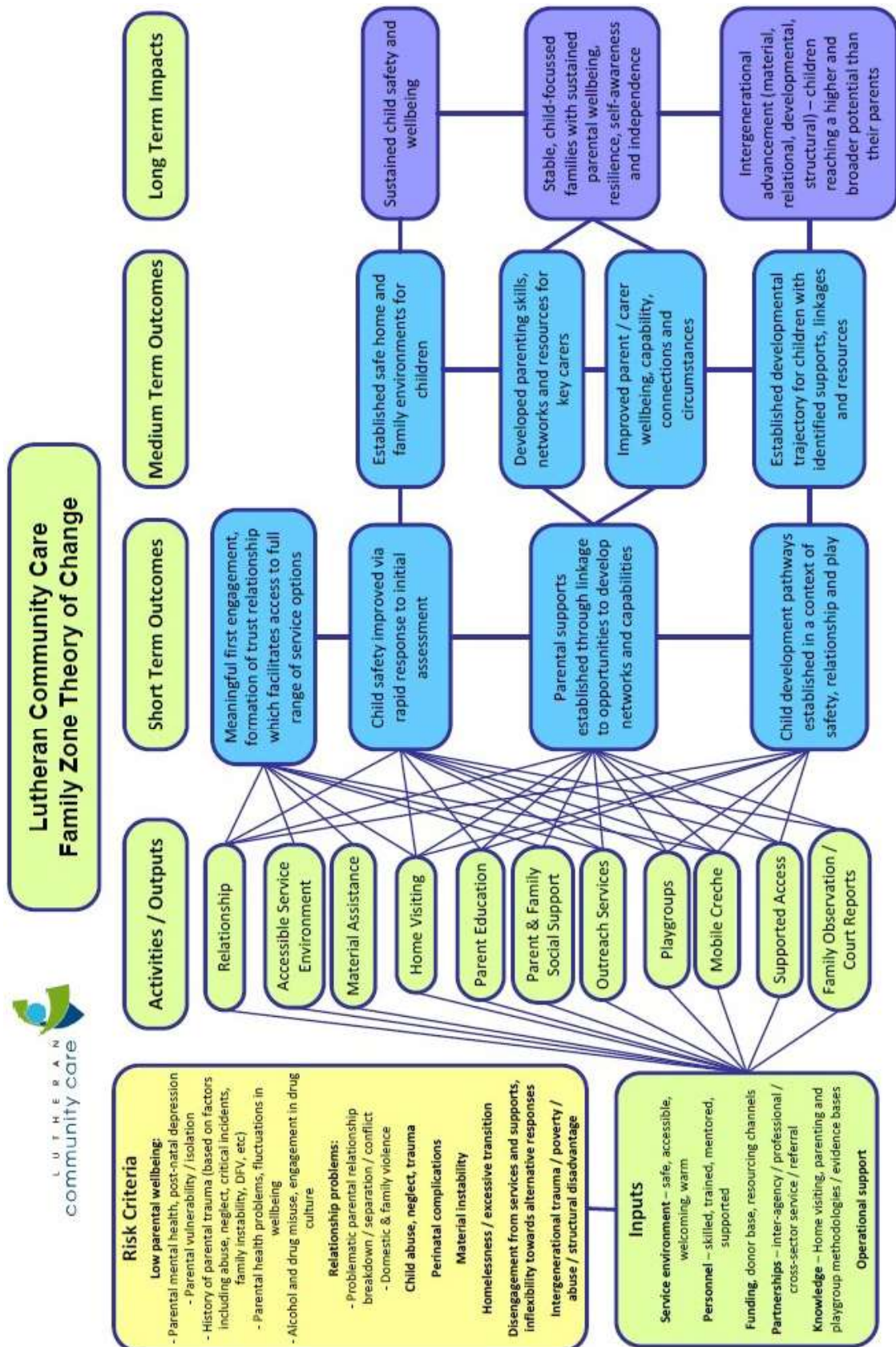
### **Family Zone Services**

The hub-based service range of the Family Zone has developed over time in direct response to local family needs, with service direction governed by Lutheran Community Care in relationship with service partners and the school community. The objectives and outcomes of the Family Zone are expressed through an internally developed Theory of Change (see Figure 1). Theories of change are defined by Mayne (2015) as '(m)odels for depicting how interventions are meant to work'.

The Family Zone responds to compromised parental wellbeing, supporting parents with limited capability, encouraging parents with low levels of child focus, or supporting families through relationship breakdowns. Referrals from the Department of Child Protection and the Family Court are frequent and are most often focused on the needs and requirements of parents. The Family Zone must therefore navigate a system that is seeking the compliance of adults and the achievement of outcomes by and for adults, in order to reach the children involved. Providing services and supports to for parents while ultimately having the best interests of their children in mind requires continual care to maintain the engagement of parents. At times, there can be clashes with the objectives and priorities of referring parties; however, the accessibility of the Family Zone and the growing need for services of this nature in the community means that referrals are not likely to be compromised by the persistence of a child-focused approach.

Figure 1

Family Zone Theory of Change



Source: Author

The longstanding lease arrangement with the Department of Education has allowed the Family Zone to take a long-term and holistic approach to complex problems. This means that, in some cases, significant improvements in family circumstances, parental behaviours and attitudes, and child wellbeing have been attained. For some families a short term, targeted programmatic intervention cannot address longstanding and overlapping risk factors.

### **The Challenge of Explaining Change**

A drawback of this approach is that it is very difficult to measure the impact of the service using standard program performance measurement tools. Due to the highly integrated nature of service delivery, where families may be linked into several programs including home visiting, parent education, social support and playgroups alongside compulsory activities related to the Department of Child Protection or the Family Court, it is difficult to describe the processes at work, much less evaluate them. It has been considered that a whole of service impact evaluation exercise, incorporating interviews with families and young people who have had long-term involvement in the Family Zone service environment, would provide a reasonable picture of the factors involved in change for families and individuals via contact with the service over time. The benefits in terms of explanation to key stakeholders, including government, funders and referring parties, means that it is worthwhile considering an activity of this nature in the future. However, this would be a costly and time-consuming exercise.

Attempts have been made to link the outcomes of the Family Zone to the program theory of Funnell and Rogers (2011) as it pertains to complex service environments. Their work refers to the pre-eminence of emergent factors, flexibility and adaptability in complex service work. Rather than people's needs and service responses following a clearly defined, predictable and formulaic pattern, the planning and delivery of services is maintained in an emergent and adaptive state. This method of working requires the dropping of assumptions about individual and family backgrounds, conditions and potentials, and is intrinsically client-centred as a result.

As per the work of Tim Moore (2016; 2018) on evidence-informed practice, the achievement of values' alignment with participating families is an essential step in acceptance of services and of progress towards positive outcomes. Research in this area is now being adopted by the SA Early Intervention Research Directorate as a framework for facilitating systemic change of the state's child protection system (Early Intervention Research Directorate 2019). Values alignment requires deep listening and flexibility on the part of the Family Zone team. It also requires an acceptance that for optimal engagement with families, adopting the goals identified by the family as initial goals for achievement is necessary. Skill is required to achieve values alignment in this service context, not only in terms of the people skills involved in empowering disadvantaged and often traumatised families to take the lead in their own development, but also because it is often the case that families have been referred to the Family Zone by agencies with a

specific agenda for change. In all of this complexity, it is the creation of a safe and welcoming environment and the development of relationship – with families, parents, children, and referring parties from child protection and the Family Court – which creates a medium for this work to occur.

The Family Zone has developed a client-centred and holistic approach intuitively over more than ten years of practice, and it is only now that emerging theory (Moore 2018; Moore 2016; Mitchell 2014; Cook and Miller 2012) supporting these approaches is being linked to the established practices within the service. It is important to continue this effort in order to validate the work that occurs and to develop efficient platforms for communicating the complexity involved in these intensive and longitudinal transactions.

### **School Space Utilisation and Intersection with the School Environment**

Provision of indoor and outdoor areas through the lease agreement with the SA Education Department has enabled spaces for welcome, offices, meetings, service delivery, health and therapeutic consultations, storage, and play. Areas within the lease agreement have changed and developed over time in response to the needs of service recipients and staff. Access to services by the general community on school grounds is managed by Family Zone staff in close communication with school leadership.

The use of school space by the Family Zone has been highly adaptive. As evidenced by the service's theory of change, a broad range of services and activities have evolved to meet the needs of diverse families. The intersection of the Family Zone with the broader school environment displays some interesting dynamics. The Family Zone environment has been recognised by some school students as a safe drop-in space, which creates opportunities for relationship building with these children, and in some cases, with their family. The school has recognised that the Family Zone can serve as a space for students to calm down where behaviours are spiralling out of control, and the space is sometimes used to support students to remain at school and avoid suspension.

### **Partnerships**

Partnerships are a key aspect of providing a service of this nature. As mentioned above, the partnership with the Department of Education and with the school leadership at Ingle Farm Primary School are fundamentally important for providing a base of operations and a direct link into the local community. The Department of Child Protection and the Family Court are currently the referring partners but there are hopes that this can develop into a more strategic relationship in future, since the goals of the parties involved are closely aligned.

The Family Zone has also been successful in securing partnerships with health services, allied health providers and mental health professionals in relation to providing broad health and therapeutic supports to families who have multiple and complex needs.



### **Comparative Approaches**

It is noteworthy that approaches similar to the Family Zone have developed in other parts of SA and Australia. Fleurieu Families based in Victor Harbour operates an equivalent service, offering support to vulnerable and at-risk families in the form of home visiting, parent education, play groups and other child development activities, as well as being a pathway to other local mainstream services. Capital Region Community Services (formerly Belconnen Community Service) in Canberra, ACT is an interstate example offering a similar approach.

### **Conclusion**

The Family Zone at Ingle Farm, developed and sustained for more than a decade through a complex array of partnerships and relationships, offers a case study of a particular model of schools as community hubs. The community benefit of the Family Zone prompts suggestions for policy development to optimise the re-utilisation of existing school facilities and the design and provision of new school-based resources to achieve enhanced community connections and wellbeing. The immediate challenge to overcome in this regard is the need for a well-defined impact evaluation statement which can explain and validate the value of this integrated, holistic and longitudinal approach to supporting families.

The relationship of the Family Zone to its school-based tenure has been a critical aspect in the service's success over the past decade and it is hoped that this partnership can continue for the benefit of families across northern Adelaide, for many decades to come. It would be valuable for a national audit of services of this nature to be undertaken, and to see how they interact and intersect with school environments. The future planning of school sites for family and community wellbeing would benefit from this effort.

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