

Community-wide interventions

Background

Childhood adversities are stressful and potentially traumatic events during childhood that can have lasting negative effects on health and wellbeing, and significantly contribute to the development of mental health problems. Intervening early to reduce and prevent the impact of adversities could help lessen the mental health burden on children and families.

Thirty-two evidence-based interventions to reduce the occurrence and impact of adversities on children under 8 years of age were identified through a literature search.

These interventions were then taken through a Delphi study, which aimed to arrive at an informed group consensus on the most feasible interventions to implement in Australia. The Delphi method is a technique for systematically collecting expert opinions through a series of step-by-step surveys, and is a preferred method to establish consensus among experts, especially where there is a lack of evidence available to support decision making.

CWI's

Community-wide interventions (CWI's) were one of six intervention categories that received consensus from experts involved in the Delphi study. Community-wide interventions take a whole-of-system approach to build community connectedness to better support families. They utilise existing community assets and are managed by partnerships between health, education, social services, and voluntary sectors. Elements may include: outreach and home visits; support to families and parents; and support for good-quality play, learning and childcare facilities.

Why choose CWI's?

The main reasons why interventions, such as Community Wide Interventions, were endorsed as a priority were the presence of evidence of effectiveness and/or cost-effectiveness to reduce adversity, the interventions' impact on mental health and its relevance to the Australian context.

Delphi participants also endorsed community-wide interventions as community strength was identified as an important determinant of child health and development. One Delphi participant stated:

'The most important factor countering mental disorders is enhanced social capital. Hence, community-wide programs have the greatest potential to influence the greatest number of people in need' ¹.

This aligns with the current evidence showing that empowering communities to promote positive changes in perceptions, beliefs and behaviours, and enhancing community connectedness and social capital are essential to create an inclusive child-friendly and family-supportive environment².

Three examples of community-wide interventions are Strong Communities, the Sure Start program, Homebuilders (formerly Family Preservation). See Table 1 below for more information. Alternatively, more detail about the Community Wide Interventions listed below can be accessed via the website:

<https://www.childhoodadversity.org.au/resources/for-service-providers/>



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Table 1. Examples of Community-wide Interventions

Intervention	Overview	Resources and personnel needed	Does it work? (Data from quasi-RCTs)
Strong Communities	A comprehensive community-wide initiative for primary prevention of child maltreatment in families with children aged 0-10 years.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mostly uses existing facilities and manpower (e.g. local government, community organisations, volunteers, educational staff, families, and parents) within the community. - An experienced outreach staff member is assigned to coordinate the program for a community sized between 5,000 and 50,000 people. - Includes an implementation guide and manuals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improved collective efficacy, child safety, and parenting practices. - Reduced rates of officially substantiated child maltreatment. - Increased help for families received from neighbours. - Increased use of positive parenting strategies.
Sure Start	A comprehensive, community-based project adapted to local needs, making maximum use of local expertise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordinated by a Sure Start Unit, which is responsible for identifying local authorities, administering the application process, and monitoring the performance of the this initiative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improved social development and positive social behaviour among children. - Increased service use to support child and family development. - Reduced negative parenting behaviour.
Homebuilders (formerly Family Preservation)	An in-home and community-based crisis intervention, counselling, and life-skills education program for families who have children 0-18 years and at imminent risk of placement in state-funded care (foster care, group care, psychiatric care).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Delivered by a team of 3-5 therapists with qualifications in psychology, social work/ counselling, a supervisor with therapist qualifications and suitable management experience, and one secretary/support staff. - The program has training and implementation materials. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduced out-of-home placement rates or delays in placements of children, and subsequent episodes of child maltreatment.

Note: There is evidence of cost-effectiveness for the Sure Start, and Homebuilders programs. Cost-effectiveness of Strong Communities is unknown.



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Implications?

No single intervention alone can be expected to effectively prevent adversity and reduce the impact on child and family mental health. A multilevel, holistic approach that considers the interplay between the child, the family, the community, and the larger socio-political structure is more likely to have the largest impact on adversity. Community wide interventions incorporate a system wide approach to building community capacity and, therefore, provide an important approach to reducing the impact of adversity on children and families.

References

- 1) Sahle, B., Reavley, N., Morgan, A. et al. A Delphi study to identify intervention priorities to prevent the occurrence and reduce the impact of adverse childhood experiences. *Aust N Z J Psychiatry*. 2021 Jul 7:48674211025717. doi: 10.1177/00048674211025717. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 34231407.
- 2) Hall, T., Honisett, S., Paton, K. et al. Prioritising interventions for preventing mental health problems for children experiencing adversity: a modified nominal group technique Australian consensus study. *BMC Psychol* 9, 165 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-021-00652-0>

