

CONVERSTATION STARTERS

Funded by the Department of Family and Community Services

Conversation Starters is delivered by Parenting Australia, a program of Jesuit Social Services. The aim of the project is to assist adults who work with children and young people understand their particular needs at key transitional stages in their lives especially those who have come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The project works in four geographical areas of Victoria, these were decided upon by the federal government, who fund the project, and informed by the Community Adversity and Resilience report (2004) on locational disadvantage, researched by Professor Tony Vinson for Jesuit Social Services. After a period of exploration and meetings with key welfare agencies and schools in these four areas a decision was made to work primarily with early childhood services and schools.

This decision was made because:

- These services have frequent a long term involvement with families
- It is expected that early childhood services and schools will engage with parents

The team discovered that with stretched resources and a lack of a systemic approach to provide information and support to staff we found many professionals were struggling to meet the complex needs of some families.

For example, a teacher was concerned for a child she knew needed help with homework, new shoes, and rest from a chaotic home but was not supported to address the problem. Also, a maternal and child health nurse felt crippled by the issue of drug use in the home of a new mother and she felt unable to help beyond her role of carrying for the baby.

Conversation Starters does not aim to help professionals solve the complex needs of families, rather it informs them of the importance of building a good relationship with an individual parent. Research tells us that to have at least one positive relationship in our lives is a protective factor from future problems. So that, if the teacher and the maternal and child health nurse, described above, could be assisted to use words that build a relationship they may over time be able to address some of the parents difficulties.

The Conversation Starters team is invited to speak to early childhood professionals and teachers and our training discusses communication skills and shares success stories of how other schools and centres work with families.

The Conversation Starters team was particularly impressed by a country primary school they visited, which was committed to addressing many problems experienced within the school including:

- Violent behaviour from students
- Conflict with parents
- Truancy
- Bullying
- or learning outcomes

The Assistant principal said they “were on their knees with nowhere to go but up”.

She explained that over a period of 2 years the school has been transformed. Initially, she explained, the school recognised that much of the bullying and violence was occurring in the schoolyard at lunchtime. To begin to address this problem a Lunchtime Links Program was established with support from the local community. The children were taken to play golf, engage in gymnastics and become involved with other local community groups at lunchtime and the parents were included. Games in the playground were organised with the older children trained to be mentors and organisers and once again parents were encouraged to help.

Trust began to build between parents and the school. Teachers smiled at and welcomed parents. Children expressed pride in their school and cared for its environment. Teachers felt more invigorated and met together to talk and share ideas. A new reading curriculum was researched and introduced to the school with the Assistant Principal confident that now, every Grade six child graduated reading at the appropriate level.

The Conversation Starters team interviewed the parents who said that the school was a good place to be for families, and that the teachers were optimistic and friendly.

One parent stated: *“I find at this school they’ll talk with you they don’t talk at you they find that the best way to do it is ‘can we get together and sort it all out ‘ they don’t tell you that you’ve got to do this and you’ve got to do that it s a combined thing”*

The families felt that they and their children were respected and were treated as equals. The school demonstrated the principles of our project. And this model is frequently used as a good practice example when speaking to other schools and the broader community. This primary school changed the lives of many disadvantaged children and set them on a more positive path.

The Parenting Australia team will report the findings on the Conversation Starters Project to the Federal Government in June 2007. We are positive that the findings will be well received and that the project can provide a positive model on how schools and families can work together for the benefit of all children.

Constance Jenkin
Coordinator

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