

Healthy Family Circle Program

A partnership between Mudgin-Gal Aboriginal Corporation and Relationships Australia (NSW)

Mark Lawrence, with Bonnie Montgomery and Luella Monson-Wilbraham

Relationships Australia (NSW) and Mudgin-Gal Aboriginal Women's Corporation joined forces to enhance the delivery of the Aboriginal women's organisation's successful Healthy Family Circle program. The collaboration experience has been characterised by growth, learning and capacity-building for both project partners. Drawing on interviews with representatives of both agencies, Mark Lawrence outlines the evolution of the program and the partnership, and how the joint venture has benefited clients and practitioners.

The Healthy Family Circle Program: Supporting women caring for children

Mudgin-Gal Aboriginal Women's Corporation, a women's centre located in the Sydney suburb of Redfern, has been running the Healthy Family Circle program for the past four years. Funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs under the Community Investment Program, the program supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women facing family violence, social isolation and disadvantage. The program was developed in partnership with Relationships Australia (NSW) (RANSW), and offers mentoring and support to women caring for children and their families in order to help them identify healthy and safe choices for their wellbeing.

Operating through a range of workshops, activities and informal exchanges—such as lunchtime conversations or “yarning”—the program aims to empower women through skill and knowledge-sharing and the development of tools to identify and reach life goals. Outcomes for individual women have included successful completion of training in governance, play-group facilitation and community support work. For one woman, involvement in the program has helped her to become a coach for a junior netball team. A recent successful Healthy Family Circle project has been a Mum and Bubs Water Group, which achieves the multiple objectives of getting children comfortable in the pool and learning water safety and teaching their mothers skills in cardio-pulmonary

resuscitation. All Healthy Family Circle Program participants have access to the Black Out Violence workshops, a program that won the Violence Against Women Prevention Award in 2004.

Community mentors

The program also trains participants as peer mentors—to each other at the centre, to other women in their community and within their families—and encourages the development of leadership qualities. An Indigenous Program Coordinator was recruited by Mudgin-Gal to oversee the project and support mentors in their new leadership role. Aboriginal women who have been recruited and trained become active in the Redfern and Waterloo areas as mentors—passing on knowledge and offering support to Aboriginal women within their own communities. The mentors are also trained to offer “accidental” or opportune counselling (providing support, information and a “friendly ear” to women needing assistance in informal settings) to other women they may meet down the street or at the local shops. This provides an opportunity to pass on advice about the support and services available at Mudgin-Gal. In addition, they have helped to facilitate groups for RANSW within the Redfern community.

Supporting healing

The Mudgin-Gal program contributes to the healing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Redfern in practical ways. According to Mudgin-Gal's CEO, Dixie Link-Gordon, information and education can assist women, especially those with children, to make better choices in their lives, thereby creating an environment more conducive to healing in other areas. In this way, Healthy Family Circle helps to support women's social and emotional wellbeing and create safer and healthier families for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Redfern. According to Ms Link-Gordon, “The program supports the healing of women by allowing a space for sharing stories, with a trained counsellor on hand to assist if needed”.

The partnership

RANSW and Mudgin-Gal have been partners in the development and delivery of the program from the outset. Mudgin-Gal shared their ideas about what they wanted to bring to the Aboriginal community in Redfern, based on identified need and what was achievable, while Relationships Australia provided training, support and a level of capacity-building to both Mudgin-Gal and the program. Clear discussions regarding the division of responsibilities for the partnership, recognising Mudgin-Gal's equal role in managing the Healthy Family Circle program, prefaced the drafting of a memorandum of understanding and addressed concerns Mudgin-Gal had about working with a large non-Indigenous organisation.

RANSW provided training for mentors early in the partnership and have also offered occasional courses in areas such as group work, domestic and family violence, child sexual abuse, parenting, and "accidental" counselling for Mudgin-Gal workers, volunteers and program participants. Relationships Australia counsellors have participated in the more intensive workshops where needed, provided on-site counselling, and assisted in referring participants to additional RANSW services where required.

The benefits to Mudgin-Gal

A key aspect of RANSW's contribution to the partnership is providing clinical support to Mudgin-Gal's Program Coordinator (in a similar manner as the Program Coordinator supervises the mentors). This allows the Coordinator time to debrief and consider new strategies to support clients, and helps ensure the long-term resilience of the program.

Mudgin-Gal's organisational capacity is supported through RANSW's assistance in preparing proposals and tenders for funding, financial reports and reports required by the funding department. Mudgin-Gal staff participate in the reporting process to gain experience in taking on the role themselves, moving them closer to self-management of the program.

The benefits to Relationships Australia (NSW)

For RANSW, the partnership with Mudgin-Gal over the last ten years has been a gift of learning that

has resulted in a re-evaluation of their interaction with Aboriginal organisations and a new imperative to work collaboratively with Aboriginal community organisations, and an understanding of how best to do so. Anita Vosper, RANSW's Northern Sydney region Manager acknowledges the organisation's previous lack of insight into the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or how to best meet them. Knowledge and experience gained from the Mudgin-Gal partnership has led to developments across other RANSW programs. For instance, the Diploma in Counselling and Group Work offered by RANSW to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants had been redeveloped into a model that is more inclusive and culturally appropriate. Sharing experience, knowledge and culture has enriched both partner organisations, resulting in expanded opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the area.

The future

The Healthy Family Circle program received a 12-month extension of funding in May 2010. The project will continue to deliver its current activities until June 2011 under the Family Support Program (FaHCSIA). Both RANSW and Mudgin-Gal are committed to maintaining a long-term partnership, including exploring alternative funding opportunities for the program. RANSW will continue to develop valued staff relationships, offer supervision and share resources. Meanwhile, Mudgin-Gal is keen to maintain the working relationship and to build on the strong, supportive networks this partnership has created. As Dixie Link-Gordon, Mudgin-Gal's CEO, says, "We are having conversations about future directions for the partnership and hope to do something together again".

Bonnie Montgomery, Communications Officer at Family Relationships Australia, interviewed Dixie Link-Gordon, CEO of Mudgin-Gal Aboriginal Women's Corporation, while **Luella Monson-Wilbraham**, intern with SNAICC's Healing Practices Documentation Project, interviewed Anita Vosper, Manager Northern Sydney, at Relationships Australia (NSW). **Mark Lawrence**, SNAICC Coordinator, Social and Emotional Wellbeing Projects, prepared this Program Spotlight from the interviews.