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Self Guided Learning Package

**Supporting Vulnerable Families**

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PsCTas is a program of Lady Gowrie Tasmania. The Australian Government through the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA), funds the Professional Support Coordinator initiative as part of the Inclusion and Professional Support Program.

## Self Guided Learning Packages

Welcome to the **\*Community Child Care Victoria**, Self-Guided Learning Package.

Self-Guided Learning Packages offer an alternative to attending training sessions and can be completed at your convenience in your own time. They are also a valuable resource for Directors/Coordinators wishing to undertake staff training in-house. This series of Learning Packages aims to develop skills and knowledge which will be valuable to you in providing quality child care programs.

### Self-help Questions

Throughout the Package there are self-help questions. These are designed to enable the reader to reflect on the learning which has taken place and to encourage further exploration of the topic if questions remain unanswered.

### Support and Assistance

PsCTas is available to support you/your staff while working through the package. Should you require assistance with any of the tasks within the package, or further information on the topic, please contact PsCTas:

P. **1800 647 718**

F. 62 306 839

E. [psctas@gowrie-tas.com.au](mailto:psctas@gowrie-tas.com.au)

W. [www.psctas.org.au](http://www.psctas.org.au)

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## Introduction

### What is a vulnerable family?

All families who use children's services bring with them a wide range of experiences, values, beliefs and needs. It is the responsibility of children's services staff to ensure that the programs that they provide are able to meet the needs of these families. While most families are able to function as a unit and provide strong supportive and nurturing relationships for children. There are some families who may experience events or stresses which may cause these relationships to deteriorate. These families may become vulnerable.

The Oxford Dictionary defines vulnerable as "*Able to be hurt or injured; exposed to danger or criticism*" (*The Australian Oxford Dictionary, 1998*). It is these vulnerable families who require intensive support from children's services staff to ensure that their needs are met

### What makes a family vulnerable?

There are many situations which may cause families to become vulnerable. These situations may be brief, depending on the ability of families to deal with and recover from these stresses or they may be ongoing. Factors which can cause families to become vulnerable include:

- Divorce/separation
- Poverty
- Substance abuse
- Illness (physical and mental )
- Homelessness
- Physical and emotional abuse
- Migration and visa status eg Asylum seekers, Refugees and Temporary protection Visa holders

When services are able to meet the needs of vulnerable families:

- There is a harmonious atmosphere.
- Children appear calm and relaxed
- Parents and staff are able to talk openly about any issues of concern
- Staff feel confident to be able to refer families on to support services
- Programs for children are flexible and responsive

- Time is set aside for staff discussion about the ability of the service to meet the needs of vulnerable families

### **Effective programs for vulnerable families and children**

Effective programs for vulnerable children and their families are those which are developed and designed to meet the individual needs of the child and the family. To be able to do this staff need to have a clear understanding of the child's needs. Determining these needs can only be achieved once a strong supportive and respectful relationship has been developed with the family. Therefore it is crucial that staff spend time familiarising themselves with all of the children within their service.

Staff need to acknowledge that the child is part of a family unit. Focusing solely on supporting the child without considering the place of the child within the family excludes the most important aspect of the child's life. It is from within the family, that the child's moral, emotional and cultural development occurs.

Programs which seek to support the child without considering the needs of the family rarely succeed. It is equally important to develop programs for the child and also for the family and the support that each group requires will be quite different from the other.

#### **Self Help Question 1**

Reflect on two families in your service which you consider to be vulnerable. List the possible reasons why you consider this.

A

B

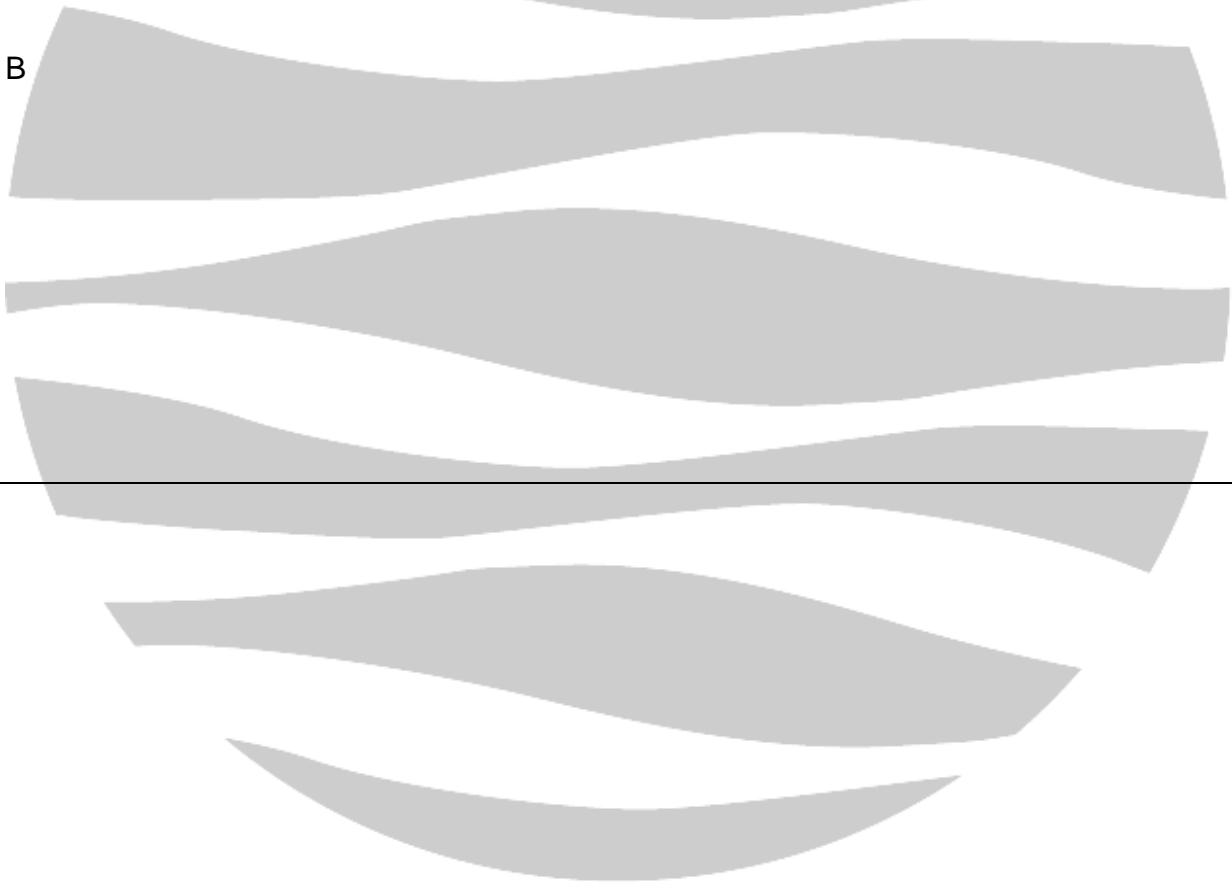
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For each family list the type of support services in your area that may be of benefit to them in their current situation.

A



B



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## **Developing strategies to support vulnerable children and their families**

In order for the child to be psychologically and physically healthy, they need:

- safety
- a warm, caring acceptance and permanent relationship with at least one adult.
- to be a part of a family in which relationships enable the child to develop a wholesome personality and sense of self.
- to be a part of a community which supports the child's development as a member of society.

*(Dr. Ruth Wraith, Chief Psychotherapist, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, Victoria, 2001)*

Children's Services staff can play an important role in ensuring their services are able to foster and nurture the development of resilient children by focusing on supporting the above areas.

### **Safety**

- Provide consistent clear limits for children which are communicated in a sensitive manner
- Ensure there is a sense of predictability about the day and expectations of the children
- Provide opportunities for children to be able to take risks and experiment with the environment without the fear of being ridiculed or disciplined

### **Permanent relationship with at least one adult**

- Ensure that staffing is consistent within the child's room
- Ensure that staff actively form strong trusting relationships with the children
- Ensure parents are supported in their parenting role through referral to relevant support services
- Ensure programs for children are developed in recognition of the need for children to develop strong relationships with their peers and with staff

### **To be part of a family which supports the development of a strong sense of self**

- Provide parents with information about children's development
- Encourage parents' ability to be positive parents through positive reinforcement
- Role model positive child/parent interactions

### **To be a part of a community which supports the child's development as a member of society**

- Ensure that activities that are provided are developmentally appropriate
- Empower children to be able to communicate their wants and needs

## Self Help Question 2

Which aspects of your program currently support vulnerable children and their families?

Why do you think they work?

Which parts of your program do you think need to improve in order to meet the needs of vulnerable children and their families?

Why do you think they need to improve?

## Developing flexible programs

The development of flexible programs with clear and consistent expectations is intrinsic in the ability of services to support vulnerable families. Families who are vulnerable may often have additional needs that services may not have previously had to consider. This flexibility will ensure that staff are able to meet the varying needs of parents. Flexibility in program provision needs to occur in all aspects of the program, from routine and transition times, to the availability of staff to meet with parents.

Take this checklist to work with you. As you progress through the week tick any of the following that you achieve.

- I asked the children to choose some activities from the store room
- I thanked the children for their help
- I tried to minimise the amount of time that I spent cleaning and tidying by involving the children in this task
- I offered alternatives for children who did not wish to sleep or eat
- I communicated transition times to the children individually rather than moving the children as a group
- I allowed the children to finish their tasks before they had to pack away.
- I ensured that I was available to chat to all of the parents at either the beginning or the end of the day

*If you managed to achieve any of these items during the week, then you probably made both yours and the children's experience more enjoyable and rewarding.*

### **Parent participation**

Consultation with parents about what they actually want and need from the service is crucial. This consultation can occur both formally through the use of surveys and orientation processes, and informally during spontaneous conversations. Parents who are actively involved in the service usually feel more comfortable to access support from staff, they are more able to talk to staff about their needs and concerns than those parents who do not participate in the service.

Developing a positive relationship with parents by providing a warm welcoming environment provides staff with the ability to work jointly with parents to develop strategies to support the child, ensuring that children receive clear and consistent messages from both the home and child care environments.

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### Self Help Question 3

Write a list of activities that you could provide to involve parents in the program.

### Case Study

Julie has recently enrolled her 4 year old daughter Shai in the local child care centre. Julie seems quite jumpy and anxious and tells staff that she has had to move lots of times and that Shai does not have contact with her father. During Shai's first week at the centre, she is extremely aggressive with the other children and staff. She grabs toys, pushes children away from her, pulls other children's hair and verbally lashes out at staff and children. As staff begin to talk to Julie about Shai's actions Julie bursts into tears and tells them that she cannot cope with Shai, that she does not know what to do with her and that she thinks that Shai would be better off without her.

What sorts of strategies would you implement to guide Shai's behaviour?

What sorts of experiences and activities would you provide in your program to support Shai?

What sorts of strategies would you implement to support Julie?

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## Review and Develop Your Own Work Performance

It is important that staff recognise and acknowledge the extra challenges that meeting the needs of vulnerable families can involve. Understanding and recognising your own limits in terms of knowledge, skills and emotional stress enables staff to develop strategies and seek out support when required

List some of the things that indicate to you that you are stressed

- 
- 
- 
- 

By looking at your own work performance, you take an honest look at the areas in which you may need to access support and information to be able to support vulnerable children and their families in a professional manner

### Setting Personal Goals

Goals are very useful, but sometimes difficult to achieve. Your first priority is to set achievable goals. Start simple. Make a concerted effort to:

- Ensure that you make time to chat with parents at the beginning and the end of the day
- Talk to your coordinator or a co-worker about how you are coping with stressful situations
- Gather and display as much information that you can about relevant support services in your community

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#### **Self Help Question 4**

Reflect on a time a vulnerable family and their child was not supported as well as they could have been by your Children's Service.

What do you think was the reason they not supported as well as they could have been?  
(ie stress, lack of time, frustration, staff lack of confidence, lack of relevant information)

On reflection – what steps could have been taken to better meet the families needs?

It is important to continue to review and develop your program. By recognising the stressful and challenging times during the day and developing strategies to address these you can continuously improve your program.

#### **This brings us back to making change:**

*Our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all connected to adults and other children – Loris Malaguzzi*

It is important when staff are thinking about making changes to their programs and the types of support that children and families may require. That they focus on the positive things children and their families bring to the service. All children are extremely rich in potential. With encouragement, guidance and support they can move from becoming vulnerable to becoming strong resilient individuals. It is the role of children's services staff to nurture and encourage this potential within all children and to empower families to be able to develop cohesive and supportive relationships. Therefore any changes that are implemented should begin from the premise that all children are strong and competent, that they all have the ability to overcome whatever issues surround them and that it is the role of staff to provide programs which enable them to do this.

**Self Help Question 5**

Focus on one particular aspect of your program and consider what small changes could be made to encourage children to reach their full potential

**What aspect did you choose?**

**What small changes could be made to encourage children to reach their full potential?**

**What do you think may be the outcome for the children/families in the service**

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*Child Care In-Service Training*

## References and Resources

Anne Greenwood, AECA Resource Book Series, No. 4 (1993) Children's Rights, Goanna Print, Canberra

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Dr Graeme Russell, (1992) Working Families: A Case for Change, Macquarie Park Research Ltd, Macquarie University, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra

Health and Community Services (1994) A Guide to Services for Children and Families in Victoria, Child Health Promotion Unit, Victorian Government Department of Health and Community Services, Victoria

Jane Inglis & Lyla Rogan, (1994) Flexible Families: New Directions in Australian Communities, Pluto Press Australia Ltd, NSW

The National Council for the International Year of the Family, (1994) The Heart of The Matter - Families at the Centre of Public Policy, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra

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## ASSESSMENT TASK

Using the information from the package, your service and the self help questions, complete the following task and return it to the In-service Training Team.

1. List at least three circumstances that may make a child or family vulnerable?

2. List at least three ways in which the program, activities and environment that you provide meets the needs of vulnerable children and their families.

3. List at least three ways in which staff work to build positive relationships with parents.

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4. Suggest three different or additional things you could consider to enhance the service to meet the individual needs of the children and families.

5. Explain why you feel your suggestion could benefit the children and their families.

6. Research some of the services in your area that staff or families could access for additional information or support. List at least five services.

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## Self Guided Learning Package

# Supporting vulnerable families

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Service: \_\_\_\_\_

Address you would like your Statement of Attainment sent to:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Approximate time taken to complete this package: \_\_\_\_\_

Please tick one

- I completed the assessment task as an individual  
 I completed the assessment task as a member of a group

Name of group (if any): \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please attach this page to your Assessment Task when you send it to  
Community Child Care**

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