The purpose of this article is to reflect on some of the work of the Pathways to Prevention Project, particularly as it has involved the local Indigenous population. A key objective is to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the issues and challenges that Indigenous parents and children face, and hence to put the “doing” of prevention work into a rich developmental-ecological and community framework. We draw on two case studies to illustrate our arguments.

**The Pathways to Prevention Project**

Pathways to Prevention is a universal, ‘early intervention’, developmental prevention project in Inala/ Carole Park. These suburbs are among the most socially disadvantaged urban areas in Queensland, yet Inala is a close-knit community with a high level of local pride (Peel, 2003). The diverse nature of its population provides a rich source of culture and heritage that is reflected in local cultural venues such as the Inala Community Art Gallery and Cultural Centre.

The project is based on the assumption that mobilising social resources to support children, families and their communities before problems emerge is more effective and cheaper than intervening when problems have become entrenched (Homel, 2005). This does not necessarily mean intervening early in life (Hayes, in press). The project is an ongoing partnership between Mission...
the chances that they will become involved in crime and related problems.

For the first five or six years of the project (1999-2004), the focus was on promoting a positive transition to school. In this period the project combined child-focused programs delivered through state preschools (the Preschool Intervention Program, or PIP) with services for families (the Family Independence Program, or FIP), within a community development framework. Details of the aims, methods and outcomes of this phase of our work are published in the report, *The Pathways to Prevention Project: The first five years, 1999-2004* (Homel et al., 2006) and in several papers (e.g., Frieberg et al., 2005). The project has evolved considerably in recent years to incorporate a range of programs and activities that are wider and deeper than in the early years, with a continued emphasis on family support and empowerment and on community development. However, work in the schools currently focuses not on preschool skills but on building connectedness between families, the primary schools, and local helping agencies.

A feature of the Inala community is its cultural and linguistic diversity, with nearly one in three households (32 per cent) having home languages other than English. The Indigenous community officially comprised 5.8 per cent of the 21,109 people living in the area at the 2001 Census, but we believe this to be an underestimate and consider that a more accurate estimate is at least 10 per cent. One person in five is aged less than 10 years, and within the Indigenous community half the population is less than 15 years old. Significantly, the rate of court appearances by young people in the district is much higher than the average for this indicator calculated across the greater Brisbane area, with Indigenous young people being the most ‘at risk’ population group.

The Family Independence Program includes a range of activities, some of which have a specific focus (such as improving child-rearing practices as a means of reducing the incidence of difficult behaviour that can reduce a child’s success at school), and others that are more broadly focused on supporting families and strengthening their capacity to deal with adversity. Because social and cultural background influences child-rearing attitudes and behaviours and cultural community membership provides a powerful potential source of social affiliation and support for families, there was a dedicated effort within the intervention design to address family issues within the cultural contexts within which they occur. This was enormously assisted by the employment of community workers from the Indigenous, Vietnamese and Pacific Islander communities.

Australia and the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance at Griffith University.

The project had its beginnings in the Federal Government report, *Pathways to prevention: Developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia*, written by the Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium (1999), a group of scholars from several disciplines that came together under the leadership of Professor Ross Homel from Griffith University. While planning began in 1999, the project was first fully implemented in 2002. Its overarching goal is to create opportunities for positive development for children and their families, and to promote their full participation as citizens in society – thus reducing
Two stories

Johnny and his family

A few months ago one of us (Homel) attended the funeral of three young Indigenous boys whose families had had some association with Pathways. The oldest boy was 11. They were killed while walking on railway tracks in a suburb south west of Brisbane. More than one thousand people, mostly from the Indigenous community, shared their memories of the boys and offered their love and support to the families. The tragedy was intensified for one of the families because just eight weeks previously they had lost an older boy in a high-speed police pursuit. He had been a passenger in a stolen car that crashed when the young driver lost control.

The story of 10-year old Johnny (not his real name) exemplifies the way problems in the domains of education, health, family life, economics, community, and criminal justice are all intertwined. The story also exemplifies the formidable barriers that parents and helping agencies such as Pathways face in working with many Indigenous young people.

Johnny spent his early years in an industrial suburb in the Pathways Project area that is exceptionally poorly serviced by public transport and other utilities (a report has been recently completed by Griffith University researchers (Johnson, 2005) on the transport needs of this area, which they have entitled Still waiting … !). In fact most people don’t even know the suburb is there, and get lost when they try to find it amidst the complex network of new roads that bestraddle a wilderness of warehouses, factories, truck depots, and storage facilities. The suburb, economically, is just about the poorest in Brisbane, and families in the area are frequently clients of a range of government and non-government agencies.

For all that, there is as noted earlier, a strong sense of community pride, and in the centre of the area is a primary school with staff who make strenuous efforts to reach out to and engage local families. Johnny had the benefit of attending a nearby Indigenous preschool, where his father was the bus driver. Johnny, so the eulogy goes, was always ready to talk and always wanted to play. At lunchtime he would sit in among the girls’ table and Talk! Talk! Talk!

When he was six years old Johnny moved with his family to another part of Brisbane, but it seems that things didn’t go well at school from that time. By Grade 2 he was becoming a handful for teachers and staff, and his parents were called in on quite a few occasions when Johnny had been hauled into the principal’s office. Once he also ran out of class and hid in the school grounds, and it took three or four people quite some time to find him.

Given this emerging pattern of behaviour, it is not surprising that he soon became too much for his teachers and was transferred to a special school for children with learning difficulties. He used to love the free taxi ride to and from this school, which he considered a real treat. However he only lasted a couple of months at the special school, whereupon his long-suffering parents had to find another primary school. They eventually found one that seemed to fit Johnny’s needs, and he began to settle down. He even made and maintained a little garden all by himself. Johnny didn’t take long however to decide he’d had enough of this school and began playing up again.

By this time, late 2004 when he was nine years old, Johnny was excluded from school by Education Queensland and he became, in the words of the eulogy, “a Primary School Dropout”. His parents tried as hard as they could to get him back into school, but eventually were forced to try and educate their child at home as best they could.

It is striking how much love and affection Johnny received from his parents, and indeed from so many people “young and old”. He touched the lives of many young people who were in and out of the family home. Enjoying a good long chat was one of Johnny’s endearing characteristics. He had many loving, caring Aunty whom he would visit often with his parents. He loved to “style up” in one of his Aunty’s air-conditioned rooms until he and another lad were ready to disappear, cruising around on their bikes exploring and always returning come nightfall with tales of their days’ journeys and adventures.

Johnny was a very mobile young lad. He often went back to the industrial suburb of his preschool years to visit an Aunty’s house, he moved often between the suburbs, South Brisbane and the city, and he also travelled to Cherbourg to visit family on many occasions. During the last year of his young life, Johnny wanted so much to be like his two older brothers. He always wanted to follow them, do all the things they did, hang out in the park, Southbank or the city. He could interact with all the teenagers, understand what they were doing or talking about. He would always say that one day he would be there joining in and all the kids would tell him otherwise, to always be a good boy and that it was no good doing the things they did.

Tragically, one aspect of the funeral was almost a parable illustrating this last point about the sometimes wild behaviour of his older peers. As the church bells tolled and the hearse began to pull out for the cemetery, five heavily armoured vans emerged from the rear, from the car park, setting out for their journeys back to the prisons and detention centres from which several older siblings and cousins had been released temporarily for the service. It is tempting – but wrong - to sink into depression and conclude that for children like Johnny there are two inevitable destinations, the prison or the cemetery. Risk is not destiny, despite the starkness of imagery that day.

In reality Indigenous children and their families and communities are amazingly resilient, and many Indigenous young people are now working their way through the education system and emerging as leaders in the trades, the professions and in politics. Homel and his colleagues have argued that we need to rethink the concepts of so-called risk factors, which are typically a catalogue of deficits like parental neglect, child impulsivity and lack of self control, learning difficulties, family violence, and the like (Homel et al., 1999; Homel, 2005). It is not that these statistical indicators don’t capture some of the crucial forces that heighten the risks of crime, mental illness,
substance abuse and related problems, it is that they fail to capture the history, culture and living reality of Indigenous and other marginalised groups. Similarly, so-called protective factors, important as they are, fail to really capture what it is about children, families and communities that make them capable of recovery from the most adverse circumstances.

In their analysis of Indigenous populations Homel et al. (1999) identified a range of social processes that transcend traditional risk factors. These included forced removals (the Stolen Generation and its intergenerational effects) and institutionalised racism. Strong cultural resilience and social bonds to family emerged as ongoing protective factors (the latter vividly illustrated in the story of Johnny’s life). Cultural resilience is evident in commonalities of exchange (a system of social relations where the emphasis of ownership is on social, not material, goods); negotiability (where social life is fluid and open to change or renegotiation); and mobility combined with a sense of place (where the groups or people are fluid but there is a generalised sense of belonging). All these features were also clearly evident in Johnny’s life story.

It is vitally important for the wellbeing of the Indigenous community and for the wellbeing of children and young people more generally that we learn the lessons embedded in the tragic stories of Johnny and the other boys – and also the lessons that are contained in the reactions of people in authority and of some social commentators to these particular tragedies.

One important lesson is that conflict at school, learning difficulties, truancy, and school exclusion are all warning bells (Farrington, 1991). Things might go seriously wrong, as they did for Johnny, if measures are not put into place as early as possible to change this particular negative pathway. In Johnny’s case, and in most similar cases, the problems persist despite strenuous efforts on the part of teachers, school guidance officers, behaviour management experts, principals and of course parents. The special school that Johnny was sent to is an institutionalised response to behaviour problems that represents a real attempt to help these troubled young people. Unfortunately all these responses frequently fail, as they did for Johnny. We need as a nation to do better.

Another lesson is that Johnny’s parents really loved him and really tried to do their best for him, but were overwhelmed in their attempts by the complex web of social disadvantage in which they were enmeshed. What they needed was substantial, meaningful, long-term support in their child rearing efforts, but what they got – at least after the funeral – was a lecture on television from the Premier about being more responsible parents, and commentary in the press that we could help kids who were school by cutting parents’ welfare. This last idea seems to surface regularly, promoted by both sides of politics. For example two or three years ago both prominent Liberal and Labor politicians argued that family welfare should be tied to the willingness of parents to undergo parent training like the Triple P program.

It’s not that the Premier and the others don’t mean well, but they don’t really seem to understand that the problem is not that parents don’t care and that they don’t do their best to keep an eye on their children, it’s that they are beset by such huge daily demands and challenges – economic, emotional, social – that they sometimes can’t give children the time, energy, skill and attention they need. These are the terms, we suggest, in which it is necessary to understand traditional risk and protective factors.

The Graham family

The story of the Graham family illustrates how the Pathways service translated the project philosophy into action through engagement with the Indigenous community at multiple levels. The story is taken from the project report, where it is presented with a number of other case studies and with detailed reflections on the lessons we have learned for theory and practice (Homel et al., 2006).

Katey is a non-Indigenous longstanding member of the local community married to an Indigenous man. Katey and Allan have five children (Douglas, 13; Jodie, 8; Toby, 5; Jamie, 3; and, Jordan, 2) who identify as Indigenous. Katey self referred to Pathways because she was afraid of having her children removed by the Department of Child Safety. It was a big step because both Katey, but more particularly, Allan were fearful of “outside interference”. Katey was ill at the time and felt that she wasn’t coping well with her eldest son who was beginning to be influenced by a peer group who were into petty crime. Her younger children were also exhibiting behavioural problems and the youngest ones were very “clingy”. Her daughter Jodie was having an identity crisis and experiencing racism and bullying at school.

Katey was initially given information about Pathways by Toby’s preschool teacher. Toby was described by his teacher as being very “angry and aggressive”. Katey reported that she had already attended Triple P at another local agency and was “put-off it” by a remark made by a counsellor there. The counsellor allegedly said that if she hit her children he would contact Family Services and have her children removed. Apparently, her partner responded that he would “handle his children the best way he could”. The Indigenous Family Support Worker (FSW) related that Katey had recently attended the funeral of a relative who had committed suicide because Family Services had removed her children and she was terrified of this happening to her family. Both Katey and Allan said that they would like to learn how to help their children to improve their behaviour and Katey subsequently attended a number of individual family support sessions at Pathways. However, after the FSW with whom she had engaged left the service, she ceased contact. Another Indigenous FSW was employed but was unable to re-engage Katey. A year later, Katey was recontacted by a third Indigenous FSW and accepted her invitation to join the newly formed Murri Family Support Group (“Murri” is the word for the local Indigenous population of Queensland).

When completing her pre-course needs analysis, Katey identified “parenting” as the issue that she required most assistance with. After some time Katey disclosed that she thought she might have to put her eldest son into care as she “wasn’t coping at all” with his behaviour. The Indigenous FSW offered to look after the boy for a few hours to give her a break and some time to think. Upon returning the child to his mother, the Indigenous FSW noted that Katey was also under significant pressure from other family members. She arranged additional childcare for her the following day and spoke to her about the benefits of talking to someone about her issues. Katey agreed to meet with a non-Indigenous Counsellor at Pathways. The Pathways Counsellor worked on an individual basis with Katey to develop positive parenting strategies to help her manage her son’s...
behaviour. At the same time, the Indigenous FSW regularly “checked in” with her to reinforce the use of these strategies and discuss any issues that she was having in terms of implementing them. In addition, she supported her during meetings at her son’s school and actively liaised with the school on her behalf. The Indigenous FSW assisted Katey to access a medical specialist for health problems that Toby was experiencing and arranged for Katey’s children Douglas and Jodie to enter the Pathways school holiday program to give her a break from them while she was ill. Katey also started attending the Murri Playgroup with her three youngest children.

Katey reports that she is “coping well now”. Furthermore, she believes that the strategies that she learned in response to her oldest son’s behaviour have also helped her to overcome a number of “developmental hurdles” with her younger sons. She is now more accepting of being separated from her children. Katey stated that since being involved in Pathways she has begun socialising with other parents that she hadn’t known previously, learned about parenting, learned about communicating with schools, and had become “better at confronting teachers non-aggressively”. In addition, the Indigenous FSW states that her communication and self-expression skills have improved. Within the context of the Murri Family Support Group, participants are encouraged to express their feeling through art. Katey continues to practise this form of self-expression at home and has started to encourage her children to join her, imparting the skills that she learned in group sessions and at the same time promoting and engendering pride in their Aboriginal identity.

Jodie experienced a great deal of racism and bullying at school. On one occasion she came home from school and asked her mother if she could pretend to be white so that she could attend a friend’s birthday party. The friend’s father had explicitly forbidden his child from inviting Aboriginals and islanders. Rather than becoming angry, as she would have previously, Katey talked about the significance of her daughter’s ancestry and showed her examples of Indigenous art and culture that she had herself encountered as part of her involvement in the Murri Family Support Group. Katey encouraged her daughter to call on her creative ancestry and write down how she felt about the experience. Katey’s involvement in the Murri Support Group has enabled her to confront Jodie’s problems at school assertively and to teach her daughter how to handle bullying. The results of this have been very positive. These skills have also been reinforced by Jodie’s involvement in the Pathways recreational activities.

As a result of her mother changing her parenting style, Toby’s aggression has reduced and he has become more settled at school. He now looks out for his younger brother. In the first few months that Katey was involved in intensive individual counselling with Pathways workers, she successfully weaned Jordan and toilet trained him. He also began talking and he stopped crying when he was separated from her. The Indigenous FSW notes that many of these changes occurred in conjunction with the child’s introduction to the ‘Sing and Grow’ music therapy program that was intermittently offered during Playgroup time.

For Katey and her family, formal parenting programs were extremely frightening, but a great deal was gained from attending informal groups such as the Murri Family Support Program, Playgroup and ‘Sing and Grow’. Katey was able to generalise the strategies and techniques that she learned in these programs and to impart her artistic skills to her children to help them manage their anger and hurt. The Murri Playgroup was extremely valuable in assisting Katey to bond with her children and to understand their developmental needs. She learned to help them become independent of her. Individual support enabled her to relate more positively with her two older children and prevented her from putting her eldest son Douglas into care. Her husband Allan has also observed her new parenting strategies and has learned from them. One of the lessons for Pathways was in having a worker who was trustworthy, well respected in the community, and able to introduce a fearful family to other non-Indigenous workers and to other services who could provide more specialised assistance to the family.

Discussion

The story of the Graham family, and the other case studies in the full report, demonstrate that individual family support work, integrated with age-appropriate group programs are crucial to the wellbeing of children who have been assessed as having higher levels of risk due to multiple stressors experienced by their families. The level of adversity experienced by a family, combined with the length of time that these adverse factors have persisted, are likely to act as a guide for the amount of time it might take to regain control of household routines and to build or rebuild caring relationships among family members.

The Graham family, and particularly Katey’s husband Allan, were very fearful of asking for assistance to deal with a family situation that was becoming overwhelming. The family was afraid of the repercussions that might have led to the removal of their children, given their Indigenous status and their unhappy history with the Department of Child Safety. Our experience suggests that the intervention that Katey received on an individual basis was only accepted because the primary caseworker was Aboriginal. When her trust in that worker was built she was then prepared to trust a non-Indigenous worker. The benefit of these two workers working in tandem was that one worker could impart the knowledge and skills while the other could follow up the session by modelling the skills and helping Katey on a practical level to integrate them into her routine at home, in a comfortable and culturally appropriate manner. This was achieved through a series of home visits. Katey’s husband could also be included in these sessions in the home in a non-stigmatising way. He did not have to risk being seen by his mates attending a support service or a parenting program. As the program was tailor made, both parents were able to learn and practise the skills suited to their particular circumstances within their own comfort zone.

The experiences with the Graham family vividly illustrate one of the main lessons of the Pathways Project, which is the benefit of culturally and linguistically appropriate support for families with young children. Comments from Pathways participants from the Indigenous, Vietnamese and Samoan communities indicate that they would not have chosen to access the service had it not been for a worker who shared their culture, history and language. This common bond encouraged them to trust in the service. Bilingual/bicultural workers have to be good listeners, good advisors and good counsellors to adults while often maintaining to their communities that their work is child-focused.

Notwithstanding the achievements of the Pathways model, and the achievements of many similar community service models, given the magnitude of the challenges that Indigenous communities face means that there are probably as many failures as successes. Despite all the love
with which Johnny and his mates were surrounded, and despite the efforts of the Pathways service and many other local helping agencies, it has to be recognised that on the fateful afternoon on which they died they were in a perilous situation and no responsible adult was there at the time to look out for them. Family and community supports sometimes fail even in the most privileged social settings. Where poverty and social exclusion are entrenched, failure of support systems is a more common phenomenon. That is why the state has a responsibility, and indeed why the whole community has a profound moral obligation to ‘look out’ for children like Johnny and for all children and young people who will from time to time encounter challenges beyond the normal capacities of families to overcome. Community service agencies cannot, on their own, fill every gap.

A further important lesson from our work with Pathways is that instead of a catalogue of statistical risk factors that mostly refer to deficiencies in children or in their families, we need to think in terms of the resources needed for parents and their communities to overcome the barriers or solve the problems that they face on a daily basis in their child rearing efforts, and contrast these with the resources actually available to them to do their job. In other words, the issue is a lack of fit between the resources needed and those available, rather than deficits in individual people or families. The challenge is to open new doors or force open half-shut doors for families and children doing it tough, not focus exclusively on the “problem child”.

We understand negative developmental pathways more in terms of system responses – and their deficiencies – than in terms of individual or family pathology. This way of thinking provides a positive and practical framework for devising effective prevention strategies, while allowing us to draw on all the scientific research on risk and protective factors as a guide to where to target resources.

A system perspective also draws us away from the local area to the larger society, where economic and social policies are developed and enacted that have profound consequences for children and families. It is abundantly clear that local strategies must be supported on a much wider scale by policies that make available the resources and opportunities that are routinely denied to children and families in disadvantaged areas. Such policies would have a major benefit for Indigenous communities if underpinned by a philosophy of genuine local empowerment.

References

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