



**PuP Program**

Promoting a nurturing environment for families

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# SUBMISSION TO THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

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Professor Sharon Dawe, 

## **THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY: ENSURING THAT EVERY CHILD BENEFITS**

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We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the discussion on the development of the Early Years Strategy. The focus of the current Discussion document places a significant focus on affordable, quality early childhood education and care and enriching children's lives by the provision of learning opportunities afforded by playgroup and toy libraries.

Our comments relate to each of the questions posed:

a. Comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy

Q1. We agree with this overall strategic approach and endorse the development implementation action plans.

b. the vision for Australia's youngest children

Q2. We are pleased that this vision will extend beyond the current vision for the ECEC sector and that this vision needs to extend across all aspects of children's lives. We would like to propose that this includes how best to interface with the early education and care settings and family life. This is particularly important for highly vulnerable children with both developmental challenges and adverse life circumstances that place them at greatest risk – including child maltreatment and exposure to parental/caregiver mental health and substance use issues.

c. outcomes

Q3. The additional outcomes that can be considered are household factors that have been directly linked to child outcome. The role of household chaos for example, lack of structure and routines is a clearly linked to child development: ensuring that the Strategy takes account of this by engagement through the early childhood setting and adopting an outcome measurement approach that includes measurement of household environment should be included in the list of outcomes considered.

d. Areas of policy priorities

Q4. We would like to consider how best the new Early Years Strategy can engage with parents and caregivers in a meaningful manner. There are extensively funded family support practices underpinned by State and Commonwealth policies. What is lacking is an explicit link between early years education and direct engagement with parents and caregivers for high risk or vulnerable children.

Q5. Having stronger links within the early childhood setting with parenting and family support agencies may provide even greater opportunities for parents and carers to be engaged in services that can **precede** formal engagement in child protection systems. This has always seemed like a lot opportunity in the work we do across the Sector. How such engagement can be encouraged and structured and what it may entail would be a valuable component in the development of the early years strategy.

Q6. Improving coordination and collaboration should focus on ensuring that family support sectors are more involved in early years education and support. Particularly for high risk children with a range of adversities.

f. evidence-based approach

Q8. We would propose that the existing frameworks described in the document reflect overarching principles. These are indeed well supported by research and the importance of an ecological approach as exemplified in both Bronfenbrenners' model and in the ARCY Nest are outstanding examples of good frameworks.

However, if we are to move towards a more nuanced approach that allows for **individual case planning** to draw from theoretical models of child development we would argue that these do not allow practitioners to undertake this.

We would like to provide an illustration of an evidence-based framework that underpins the development of individually tailored family support plans. This framework integrates theoretical models from attachment and behavioural parenting theory, conceptualizing that parental emotional regulation and resourcefulness directly influences the quality of the caregiving relationship (attachment) and parenting behaviours (behavioural theory). This model enables practitioners across diverse settings, including in principle early childhood settings, to draw from a single model of therapeutic family support case planning.

This underpins the Parents Under Pressure (PuP) program which is aimed at improving family functioning and reducing child abuse in high risk families with children from birth to 8 years. The PuP program is based on *attachment theory* in which the quality of the relationship between the primary carer(s) and child help provide a critical foundation for a child to develop a sense of worth. This relationship needs to one where a child feels safe and nurtured. Primary carers need to know what to do in helping to manage difficult parenting situations so the extensive literature

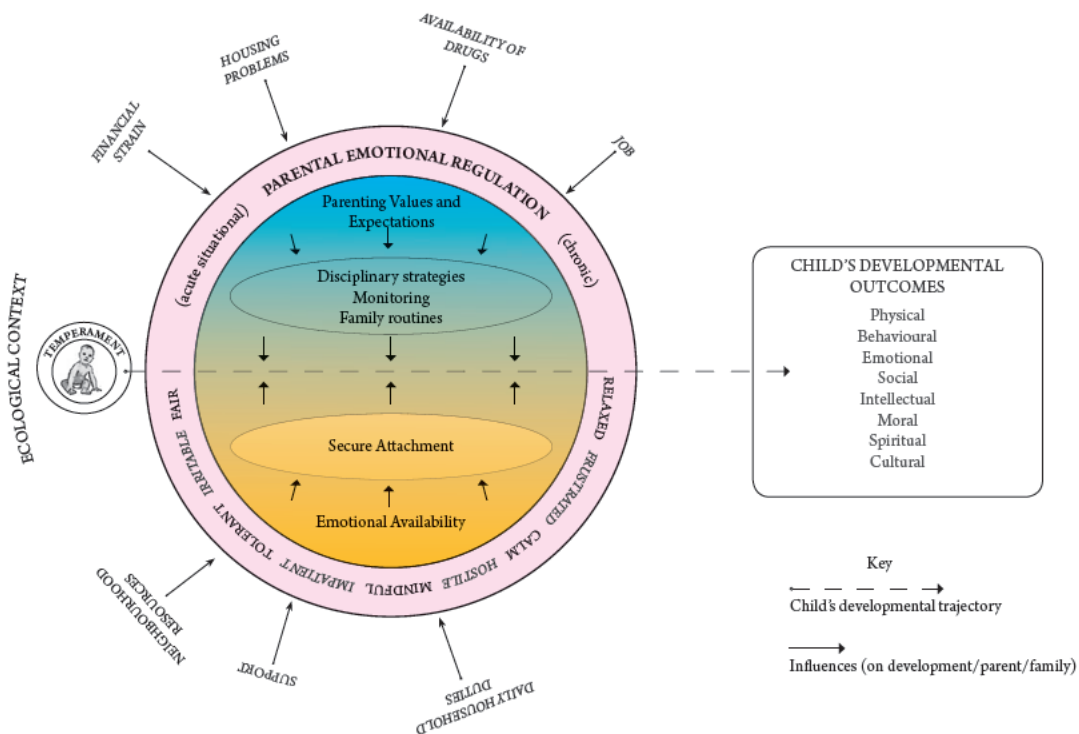
on *behavioural parenting skills* provides the context for explicit parenting skills. However, and crucially for high risk families where there are concerns about current or risk of child maltreatment is a focus on *parental emotional regulation*.

The quality of the parent-child relationship and the parent's capacity to provide consistent, and appropriate parenting skills is seen to be dependent upon the parents' ability to understand and manage their own emotional state.

We would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the evolving discussion on the Strategy and in particular look at the interface between the provision of outstanding early childhood education and family support.

## ELABORATION ON THE INTEGRATED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is not uncommon for practitioners to feel overwhelmed by the number of problems in the lives of the families they are asked to help. To make sense of what feels like a chaotic and complex interplay of forces intrinsic and extrinsic to the family's current situation, we developed the Integrated Framework. This practice framework, informed by existing models of child development and family functioning, moves beyond simply identifying the presence of risk and protective factors, to articulating *how* and *why* specific risk and protective factors are important



for a particular family. For example, it is easy to assess that a family is experiencing considerable financial and other life stressors, that the parents employ poor coping strategies to solve difficulties, maybe experiencing problems with low mood or other severe mental health issues, and are abusing substances. What is more difficult, but essential, is understanding how these factors interact and operate to reduce a parent's capacity to meet the needs of the children in the family.

The Integrated Framework integrates information obtained from talking to families, the results of assessments using self-report measures, and observations of the quality of the parent-child relationship and the child's home environment. The aim of the assessment is to identify the key issues that are likely to impact on child outcomes. These issues are used to define clear and measurable goals that represent the changes a family will need to make in order that their children have the best chance of achieving their full potential.



## Professor Sharon Dawe

PhD MA(Hons) BA

Registered Psychologist (Clinical)



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### Overview

Sharon Dawe has an international reputation and extensive research track record in addiction, mental health, child maltreatment and assessment of neurodevelopmental disorders. (H Index 51; citations >9,200; top 1% of professors benchmarked against Australian G08 Universities). She has been working in the field of substance misuse and mental health for over 30 years on a range of clinical interventions for substance misuse, high risk families and child maltreatment. Her most recent work focuses on the interplay between early childhood adversity and exposure to trauma and parenting with a focus on assessment and models of care for neurodevelopmental disorders. She has co-developed the award-winning Parents under Pressure program in collaboration with Paul Harnett.

### Key Skills

- Evaluation of psychological interventions including randomised controlled trials;
- Extensive experience in translational research; reviews, systematic reviews and meta-analysis.
- Skills in development of training for diverse range of practitioners including those in community sector organisations in regional and remote settings

### Project Management and Stakeholder Engagement

Prof Dawe has successfully led large projects funded by NHMRC, Commonwealth Government and funding from Non Government organisations across Australia, UK and Ireland.

Prof Dawe has extensive experience in engagement with key stakeholder groups in the family support and child protection sector, with a strong engagement across the non-government sector that provides frontline support to families involved in child protection.

She has worked closely with a number of these agencies helping to shape and implement best practice in child protection in Australia (e.g., Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, NT) and overseas (Scotland, Ireland). She has led a team to support over 400 agencies in their implementation of the Parents under Pressure program.

### Selected Publications

**Dawe, S.**, Eggins, E., Betts, J., Webster, H., Pomario, T., Doak, J., Chandler-Mather, N., Hatizs, D., Till, H., Harnett, P., Wood, A., Shelton, D. (2023). An Investigation of the utility of the Australian Guide to the diagnosis of fetal alcohol disorder in young children. *Alcoholism: Experimental and Clinical Research*, DOI: 10.1111/acer.15012

Betts, J. Eggins, E., Chandler-Mather, N., Shelton, Doug., Till, H., Harnett, P., **Dawe, S.** (2022). Interventions for improving executive functions in children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD): A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*,. DOI: 10.1002/cl2.1258

**Dawe, S.**, Harnett, H., Eggins, L., Gullo, M., Barlow, J. (2021). Moderators and mediators of outcomes of substance misusing parents: Further evaluation of the Parents under Pressure programme. *Addiction*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/add.15579>

Reid, N, Shelton, D., Warner, J., O'Callaghan, F., **Dawe, S.** (2017) Profile of children attending a fetal alcohol spectrum disorder diagnostic service. *Drug and Alcohol Review*. ISSN 1465-3362 DOI 10.1111/dar.12519

For more information see (<https://experts.griffith.edu.au/19021-sharon-dawe>)



A. Prof Paul Harnett

PhD MA(Hons) DipClinPsych BA

Clinical Psychologist



## Overview

Paul Harnett is an Associate Professor in Griffith University's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. He moved to Griffith university after 16 years in the School of Psychology, University of Queensland. (H Index 30; citations >3,200). He has been working in the field of child protection, mental health and youth justice for over 30 years. He has been involved in the development of program to support parents and kinships carers, including the Parents under Pressure (PuP) which he co-developed with Prof Sharon Dawe. A key research area has been program evaluation, including effective studies (RCTs), implementation and cost-effectiveness. He has also conducted theoretical research in personality. He has a specific interest in child protection decision-making and developed the influential Capacity to Change model of child protection decision-making. He was made a Fellow of the Australian Psychological Society (APS) in 2012 in recognition for his services to the profession.

## Key Skills

- Clinical experience in mental health, child protection and youth justice.
- Program development.
- Program evaluation (RCTs, realist evaluation, implementation science).
- Systematic reviews and meta-analysis.
- Qualitative research.

## Project Management and Stakeholder Engagement

A. Prof Harnett has successfully led a large project funded by the ARC and Non-Government organisations and co-lead projects funded by the NHMRC and Commonwealth Government.

A. Prof Harnett has extensive experience in dissemination of programs. This involves engagement with family support and child protection agencies in the government and non-government sector to provide training and implementation support to practitioners. This has included supporting over 400 agencies in their implementation of the Parents under Pressure program in Australia, the UK and Canada.

He works closely with First Nations community groups and is currently establishing an Elders Cautioning program in partnership with Inala Elders and the Queensland Police Service.

## Selected Publications

**Harnett, P. H.**, & Featherstone, G. (2020). The role of decision making in the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Australian child protection system. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 113. DOI:10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105019

**Harnett, P. H.**, Kelly, M. C., & Gullo, M. J. (2023). The impact of posttraumatic stress disorder on the psychological distress, positivity, and well-being of Australian police officers. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 15(2), 340-348. DOI:10.1037/tra0001136

**Harnett, P. H.**, Barlow, J., Coe, C., Newbold, C., & Dawe, S. (2018). Assessing capacity to change in high-risk pregnant women: A pilot study. *Child Abuse Review*, 27(1), 72-84. DOI:10.1002/car.2491

For more information see (<https://experts.griffith.edu.au/5049-paul-harnett>)