



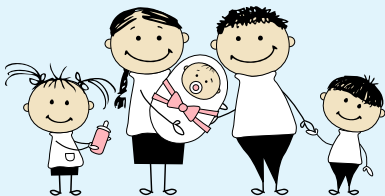
Lake Macquarie
Children and Family Strategy 2015-2020



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“The early years of childhood are the most important for a person’s and a community’s growth and prosperity.”



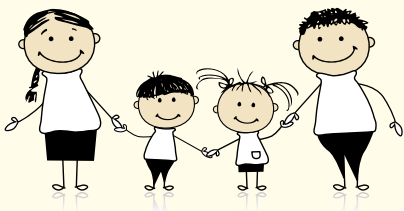
Introduction

In recent years, it has become more apparent that the early years of childhood are the most important for a person's and a community's growth and prosperity. The early years are where the greatest progress in brain development takes place, the foundations for learning are set and the child develops a sense of who they are and where they fit into the world around them.

Just as the early years are considered the optimal time for vital growth and development, families also have a critical impact on the way in which children grow. Parents and carers are a child's first teacher; siblings, family friends, and extended family are a child's first glimpses of social interactions and behaviours; and communities where children and families live, are the first environments which can impact upon and support children and families.

This strategy has been developed in order to create supportive environments, vibrant communities and enriching experiences for children and families. This strategy details the key focal areas which Lake Macquarie City Council have identified as important and viable in achieving a City which celebrates, promotes and cares for the lives of children and families.

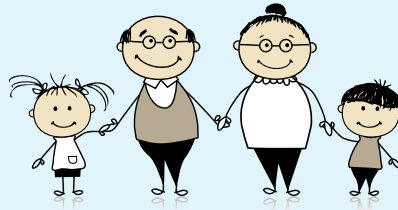
The development of the strategy formalises Lake Macquarie City Council's commitment to supporting children and families in the City. The strategy has been developed by the Community Planner for children and families, who is part of Council's Social and Community Planning team. *The Children and Family Strategy 2015-2020* has been developed, to not only meet the targets set out in Council's 10-year plan, but also to work towards meeting the needs of children and families in our City.



“There are approximately 53,261 families in Lake Macquarie City which consists of 152,449 people.”



Profile



Lake Macquarie City is home to approximately 200,796 residents, all of whom are spread across more than 780km² of land and lake. *The Children and Family strategy 2015-2020* is targeted towards all children aged 0-11 years old and all types of families.

According to the ABS 2011 statistical data, there are approximately 53,261 families in Lake Macquarie City which consists of 152,449 people. Using these figures, it is evident to see that The Children and Family Strategy 2015-2020 has the potential to affect approximately 80 per cent of the total population.

ABS 2011 data also tells us that there are approximately 27,649 children aged 0-11 years. This equates to 14.6 per cent of the population of people living in Lake Macquarie City. As children are one of our most vulnerable members of our society, it is important that the decisions we make and the programs/services we provide, take into consideration the unique needs and abilities of our youngest community citizens.

Currently in Lake Macquarie City there are a variety of services, programs and resources already available to families and children, from both private and not-for profit organisations. Through this strategy, Lake Macquarie City Council aims to enhance and build upon what is already currently available, rather than create new services. This will ensure that the strong foundations that are already built within the community are maintained and are further strengthened to support children and families.

Development of plan and consultation

Lake Macquarie City Council previously adopted and implemented a Children's Strategy 2009-2014. At the expiry of the previous Strategy, a review was conducted to determine achievements and areas of continued need for the new strategy. The review can be found in Attachment 2. *The Children and Family Strategy 2015-2020* has been developed to meet a range of outcomes as identified in the previous strategy, various frameworks and throughout the consultation process. It is imperative that the Strategy is aligned with other Local and State Government Frameworks, as well as meeting the areas of need as identified by services who work with children and families on a daily basis. Not only will this allow for more focused attention to the target areas specific to our City, but it will ensure a more cohesive and structured response throughout the levels of Government. The key plans consulted in the development of the Children and Family Strategy were:

- *Lake Macquarie City Council Community Strategic Plan 2013-2023*, and
- *NSW State Plan 2021*.



*The overall mission of
Lake Macquarie City Council
is to provide a diverse range
of services and facilities
to residents*

Lake Macquarie City Council Community Strategic Plan 2013-2023

Lake Macquarie's Community Strategic Plan 2013-2023 was developed in consultation with the community to identify a shared vision and key priorities for the City. While there are several focus areas, vision statements, identified goals and values, there are a key number of specific items that relate directly to the development of the *Children and Family Strategy 2015-2020*. They include the following:

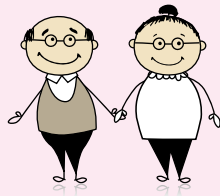
- The overall **Mission** of Lake Macquarie City Council is to provide a diverse range of services and facilities to residents;
- a **Vision** to encourage a community spirit which enhances health and social wellbeing and encourages family life;
- a **Vision** to bring people together to support each other, inspire change and achieve our common goals; and
- the **Goal** to plan and provide social infrastructure to meet community needs.

Feedback on the current service and facilities that Council provides, specific to children and families, identified that the community felt that services and facilities for children was of high importance, yet they were not satisfied with what is/was on offer. This suggests that there could be an improvement in the services and facilities that are provided to children in the Lake Macquarie City.

Key priorities that have been identified are;

- a safe and healthy community;
- a connected community where diversity is welcomed and social needs are met; and
- a community where culture is celebrated and promoted.

Each of these priorities necessitates promoting public health, building on community partnerships and providing a range of services and facilities to meet the diverse needs of the community. All of these priorities affect directly upon children and families.





The strategy will focus on the two key themes of supporting education and family service providers, and supporting children's development and families

NSW State Plan 2021

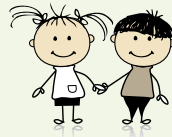
The *NSW State Plan 2021* aims to make NSW number one in service provision, infrastructure, the economy and Government accountability. Out of the five key areas, there are two that relate directly to The Children and Family Strategy 2015-2020; return quality services, and strengthen our local environment and communities.

The NSW State Plan identifies the following goals, which influence upon children and families:

- keeping people healthy - reducing rates of obesity, increasing physical activity;
- child wellbeing - including being developmentally on track when they start school and being free from significant harm of abuse and neglect;
- improve the learning outcomes of all children - improving access to quality early childhood education and improving literacy and numeracy student achievements; and
- make it easier for people to be involved in their communities to increase community participation - to create communities that are more connected and where support networks thrive.

In addition to the above goals, there are adopted policies and programs which have been developed to further support the *NSW State Plan* and which have been reviewed in the development of Lake Macquarie's *Children and Family Strategy 2015-2020*. These include:

- Australian Early Development Census;
- Keep Them Safe;
- NSW Healthy Eating and Active Living Strategy; and
- National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing.



A discussion paper was initially developed, outlining the current issues identified in research papers, as described by advocacy groups, and in current Government frameworks. This discussion paper was distributed to a range of family support services, advocacy groups, children's services and other services that work with children and families to seek feedback on the identified issues and how Lake Macquarie City Council can support improvement in these identified areas.

Services were invited to attend a discussion workshop where the identified issues in the paper could be further explored and discussed, while also allowing for services to provide their input and ideas, based on what they experience and encounter on a daily basis. An outline of the discussion points is included in Appendix 2.

There were several other direct consultations with other groups who were unable to attend the workshop, and their comments/feedback and ideas have all been included in Appendix 3. All of this information has been used in the development of the Action Plan under each priority section.

With the understanding of the identified issues, along with Council's own targets, an action plan has been developed under two key themes: supporting education and family service providers and supporting children's development and families.



*High-quality
childcare is shown to
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Supporting education and family service providers

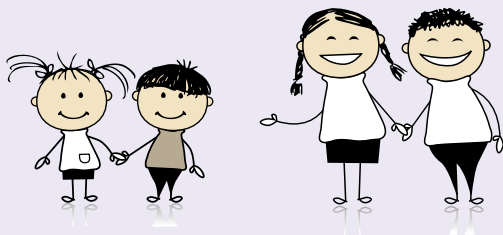
With more than 18,000 children attending an education and care service; be that an early learning service or a primary school, it is critical that these services are supported to deliver high quality services to the children who attend. Other service providers such as family support services, and non-government agencies support families through parenting programs, resources, children's programs and as a referral base for other needs. It is important that the families and children of Lake Macquarie City have access to a range of programs and resources to meet their diverse needs. No single organisation can meet the complex needs of families, and as such a collaborative approach to supporting children and families is of paramount importance.

a) Quality early education and care services

As many families utilise the service of an education and care facility (such as a child care centre, preschool, long day care centre, Family Day Care) to provide care for their young child on a regular basis, it is of paramount importance that the care and education provided to each child is of a high quality.

High-quality childcare is shown to have positive impacts on child development in both the short and long term. High quality care can be identified in a service by:

- above minimum ratio standards;
- staff who are well-trained, experienced and are committed to providing a range of engaging and stimulating experiences to each child;
- an environment where children are safe and confident to explore, wonder and extend their own capabilities; and
- an overall commitment to ensuring that the care and education of all children attending the service is the underlying principle that guides all directions of the service.





*Continued collaboration
between family services
will help support the
complex needs of families*

What the community told us:

- providing support and guidance to new and existing services is very valuable;
- a thorough development application review is necessary to prevent services being “Council approved” but not “Licensing body approved”;
- providing workshops and training to up-skill educators in Lake Macquarie; and
- council is in a good position to advocate for children, families and the services that support them.

B) Family services

With a range of family support services in Lake Macquarie City, it is imperative that there is continued connection and collaboration between them all. In recent years, there has been growing understanding that family needs are becoming more complex and a single service cannot meet all the needs of individual families.

To ensure that services are not replicating the same services, resources and programs as other services, and to enable them to be well connected to allow for collaborative approaches to working with families, services need the opportunity interact and build rapport with one another.

In Lake Macquarie City there are several opportunities throughout the year for services to connect together and build networks, however, there is no single dedicated forum for which child and family services can come together, discuss issues, identify ways to work on these issues and to collaborate together.

Lake Macquarie City Council is ideally placed within the community to facilitate a child and family only interagency, with the aim of ensuring effective service delivery and effective collaboration, and networking opportunities throughout the year.

What the community told us:

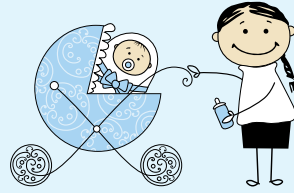
- a child and family only interagency would create more collaboration between services and help to break down the barriers of communication; and
- create a space for child care services to learn about family support services which will empower them with more confidence to make contact and build relationships – either through an interagency or newsletter updates.



A woman with reddish-brown hair, wearing a cream-colored lace-knit sweater and a red bag, is smiling while carrying a baby in a grey baby carrier. The baby is wearing a pink and purple patterned outfit. In the background, there is a banner for 'You're Kidding Me' with a logo and text about connecting families with services and programs in Lake Macquarie.

*The first five
years of life, are
considered the
most important
for children's
development*

Supporting children's development and families



The first five years of a child's life are shown to be the most important. The first five years is when all the "wirings" of the necessary pathways in the brain are occurring. Providing a stimulating and nurturing environment, abundant with enriching experiences, is critical to optimal brain development and subsequently, social, emotional and physical development.

A child's most important work is 'play'. Play allows children to explore concepts, test theories, expand their capabilities, and develop relationships with peers and family. It is "a context for learning, through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they actively engage with people, objects and representations" (*EYLF, 2009, p.46). Ensuring that there are appropriate play spaces and environments for children to engage with, assists children in undertaking this important work.

As children grow they become more independent and are constantly testing the boundaries within their environment – the boundaries of their bodies, their minds, the rules of which they are expected to live by, and their place in their social surroundings. It is important to support children in this time, by providing environments and experiences which will allow them to safely challenge themselves and while allowing positive growth.

a) Australian Early Development Census

The Australian Early Development Census is an Australian Government initiative which shows how young children have developed as they start their first year of school. The AEDC highlights which community areas have children vulnerable in the following areas of development:

- physical health and wellbeing;
- social competence;
- emotional maturity;
- language and cognitive skills (school based); and
- communication skills and general knowledge

*One in five children are
not meeting developmental
milestones in Australia*



From the data collected in 2012, 22 per cent of children in Australia are vulnerable in at least one of the aforementioned developmental areas. This means that 1 in 5 children are not meeting developmental milestones in Australia. Lake Macquarie City specifically, has approximately, on average 18 per cent of children attending school who are vulnerable in at least one developmental area. This percentage increases and decreases in certain communities around the Lake. For example in certain areas there are close to 50 per cent of children vulnerable, while in others it can be closer to 10 per cent vulnerability.

As the first five years of life are critical for development, and is the time of most rapid growth, it is important that all children are exposed to enriching and positive experiences which support and stimulate development.

What the community told us:

- not all services are aware of the AEDC and how this can be used to support their planning initiatives and funding applications;
- engaging with vulnerable children and families can be very difficult, as many do not access services until their child is in school;
- literacy, communication, mental health and healthy lifestyles are the main areas of concerns for children; and
- it is important to ensure that there are services and programs targeted in the most vulnerable communities.

b) Children's physical health

There has been extensive coverage in the media in recent years over the growing obesity epidemic in Australia. With one in four Australian adults currently overweight or obese, it is well supported that targeting children and families in the early years to live healthy lifestyles, will have the greatest impact to leading healthy lifestyles later in life.

The Hunter boasts some alarming statistics, with 25-30 per cent of young children classified as overweight or obese. This number is estimated to grow by 1.7 per cent each year; meaning that approximately, every year, 3000 more children will fall into the category of being overweight or obese (Bell, 2008).

Obesity is a culmination of "over-nutrition" (too many energy dense food and drinks, large portion sizes) and "under-activity" (for example too much screen time, not being physically active for recommended amounts of time). It can be challenging to find the right balance of energy input (what you consume) and energy output (exercise and movement), but it is vital that children and families know the benefits and importance of nourishing their bodies and living active lifestyles.

What the community told us:

- obesity is a very big concern in young children;
- active after school programs are beneficial, however more are needed;
- portion sizes and over nutrition can be confusing for families as well as having knowledge of cost-effective, appropriate meals, snacks and lunchbox ideas to provide their children; and
- there is reluctance in early childhood and in the community to allow children to engage in "risky play". This reduces opportunities for children to engage in stimulating physical activity and develop lifelong skills such as negotiating, safety and personal boundaries.



Early childhood development and life experiences contribute strongly to a person's mental health and wellbeing during childhood and later in life



c) Mental health

Mental health in early childhood can be defined as:

“The capacity of a young child - within the context of their development, family, environment and culture - to:

- participate in the physical and social environment
- form healthy and secure relationships
- experience, regulate, understand and express emotions
- understand and regulate their behaviour
- interact appropriately with others, including peers
- develop a secure sense of self.

Early childhood mental health and wellbeing is related to healthy physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. Early childhood development and life experiences contribute strongly to a person's mental health and wellbeing during childhood and later in life” (Kismatter, 2014).

There is growing research about mental health issues developing in young children. Many symptoms, including hyperactivity, restlessness and aggression can potentially be masking underlying mental health problems such as anxiety or depression.

Mental health risks have been linked to both genetic factors (for example, family history) and environmental factors (for example, relationships and early interactions with family members). Research has identified that there are a number of protective factors, which can help to decrease the incidence of mental health issues developing later in childhood such as warm nurturing relationships with caregivers, temperament and strong cultural identity.

Early education services and family support services have been recognized as key resources in helping families to identify children who may be experiencing mental health issues, to implement simple strategies to help children, and are ideally placed with supporting families to seek additional help.

What the community told us:

- mental health concerns is something that is becoming more prominent in our communities; and
- there is still a stigma associated with the term “mental health” and changing people's perception about what it is and who it affects is of high importance.





Literacy-rich environments help children be better prepared for when they start school

d) Literacy and communication

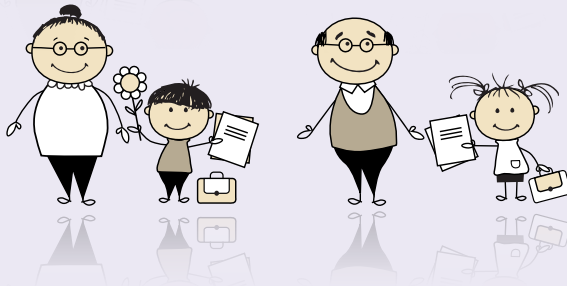
Literacy and communication skills are two areas of development that every child needs to not only support them throughout their childhood journey; but they are skills that will stay with them throughout their entire life.

Communication development is considered a process which occurs naturally, as children observe, listen to and imitate the communication between others in their environment. It is somewhat believed that communication is an innate process which is built into the human brain to acquire. However, with this in mind, there is an abundance of research which suggests that children's communication skills (listening, talking, signing etc) are not developing as well as they should be. More children in recent years are requiring speech therapy sessions; more parents are concerned with their child's communication and are unsure of what is "normal" development; and more education and care services are enlisting speech therapists to assist their staff and children in developing children's communication abilities.

Contrary to communication development, literacy development – the ability to read and write - are learned skills. Children are not simply born with the ability to know how to read and write, they must be exposed to it and be offered opportunities to engage with it, before they can acquire it. There has also been growing evidence that supports the idea that children need to be exposed to "literacy-rich" environments from birth. These are environments where children can see and explore printed words and pictures (posters, shopping docket, signs, books, being read to), and where they can have the opportunity to create their own literacies (painting, drawing, scribble, or making up their own letters/stories). Children who are exposed to these kinds of environments will already have an understanding of literacy before they begin school, and will be much better prepared and ready to learn formal reading and writing skills when they start school.

What the community told us:

- the importance of literacy and communication needs to be made evident to families, as well as strategies and techniques for how to increase exposure to and success in literacy and communication abilities; and
- providing speech screening and speech development information sessions to children will be very valuable to children and families.





*There are more than
50,000 families in
Lake Macquarie City*

e) Families

With more than 50,000 families in Lake Macquarie City and more than half of the population living within a family household, it is important to acknowledge the needs and additional support which families may need over time. Families within Lake Macquarie City are diverse, with a range of compositions, incomes, ethnic backgrounds and other factors that contribute the way in which they function.

One of the most important elements in a family, which contributes mostly to a child's development, is 'parenting'. While there is no "one size fits all" guide to parenting, there are several core parenting factors which play a vital part in family relationships and achieving better child developmental outcomes. These include;

- parental involvement (participating and engaging in their child's world, achievements, schooling etc);
- parental warmth (being warm and responsive to children's needs);
- parental consistency and predictability (children are aware of the limits and boundaries as they are consistent and children will know the outcomes of their actions);
- the absence of harsh and hostile interactions (parents role model positive, respectful and warm interactions); and
- safe and secure environments (children live in environments that are free from harm and neglect).

Ensuring that families are aware of the services, programs and resources that are available to them in the community, will ensure that parents not only become better equipped throughout the parenting journey, but will also help families to feel more supported and connected to others. This connection is vital as research has shown that when families feel connected to services and other families in the community, they feel more supported and less isolated. This can lead to more positive outcomes, not just for children within the family, but also for the family as a whole and the relationships within each family.

What the community told us:

- engaging with vulnerable or at risk families can be very difficult;
- supporting families is a complex process and requires a holistic approach, with the involvement of multiple services at one time;
- families need clear, meaningful, and quality information to assist them; and
- parent information sessions on a variety of child development areas could assist parents with making better informed decisions about their child's development, health and wellbeing.



Children and Family Strategy - Action Plan

Supporting education and service providers

Priority item	Outputs	Responsibility	Timeframe
Child and family services have the opportunity to network and collaborate together	<p>A child and family interagency is developed.</p> <p>Children and family services meet quarterly</p> <p>Guest presenters are sourced to present on specific child and family issues</p>	Community Planner for Children and Families	1-2 years
Services are well informed about current issues, resources, programs and opportunities in Lake Macquarie City	<p>Regular emails and updates are sent to services</p> <p>Council's Community Noticeboard is kept up to date and promoted to all services</p>	Social and Community Planning Team	Ongoing
Educators and Family Service staff are well trained and have access to quality professional development	<p>At least two workshops/training sessions are provided to service staff each year.</p> <p>An evaluation of each workshop is completed by attendees to determine value of each one.</p>	Community Planner for Children and Families	1-2 years
Child care centres are designed and built to a high quality standard	<p>A thorough and explicit Development Application process is made available to potential child care developers.</p> <p>Council staff are available to provide advice in relation to child care centre specific applications</p>	<p>Community Planner for Children and Families</p> <p>Development and Compliance</p>	Ongoing
Current issues which impact on children, families and services are advocated for/ against	<p>Council Community Planner for Children and Families is up to date with current policies through subscriptions to relevant bodies</p> <p>Letters of support/concern are developed and submitted to relevant authorities on behalf of child and family services</p>	Community Planner for Children and Families	Ongoing
Council owned Child care centre buildings are well maintained	Child care centres are assessed on a yearly basis and a projected works program is developed	<p>Assets Department</p> <p>Social and Community planning</p>	Ongoing

Supporting children's development and families

Priority Item	Outputs	Responsibility	Timeframe
Children and families have access to experiences and information relevant to their needs	<p>A Child and Family Program is delivered throughout the year to families and children including topics such as (but not limited to);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • speech screening; • yoga and relaxation for children; • connecting to the great outdoors; • brain development; • behaviour management; • healthy eating; and • celebration of children's week 	<p>Community Planner for Children and Families</p> <p>Lake Mac Libraries</p> <p>Lake Macquarie Art Gallery</p> <p>Sustainability</p>	1-5 years
Families are aware of the support services available to them in the Lake Macquarie Area	<p>The "You're kidding Me" Expo is held annually bringing together family and support services in the one location.</p> <p>The Community Directory is regularly updated and promoted to families</p>	Community Development	Ongoing
Safer communities for families and children are promoted	<p>The partnership between Council and the Domestic Violence Committees in Lake Macquarie is maintained.</p> <p>Council continues to support the Domestic Violence Committees in delivering safer community programs and initiatives.</p> <p>International Women's Day is promoted and celebrated</p>	Community Planner for Children and Families	Ongoing
Families and children are aware of outdoor recreational opportunities in their local area	<p>A playground facility review is conducted and information is made available on Council's webpage.</p> <p>The Community Directory is regularly updates and promoted to families.</p>	<p>Community Development</p> <p>IT and Communications</p>	2-3 Years



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