Empowering Parents Empowering Communities
Peer-Led Parenting Program in Culturally Diverse Communities

About our organisation:
VICSEG New Futures is a not for profit, community organisation incorporating two domains: the Victorian Cooperative on Children’s Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG), which provides placed-based programs for families, children and young people throughout the northern and western suburbs of Melbourne and New Futures Training, which delivers nationally recognized vocational training to people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, particularly women, who wish to work in the care services.

Overview of project
VICSEG has been awarded two-year funding (2015-2017) by the Australian Government / Department of Social Services (DSS) to deliver Empowering Parents Empowering Communities (EPEC) in two Victorian metropolitan Communities for Children (CfC) sites - Hume and Brimbank.

EPEC is being delivered in tandem with VICSEG’s Family Mentoring Program, combining individual and group support for parents from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. The Murdoch Children’s Research Unit (MCRI)/Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) is subcontracted to provide implementation support and quality assurance for EPEC programs across both sites. EPEC has been widely implemented in Community Hubs in Tasmania. Due to its promising results, the program has been the subject of a national ARACY webinar in December 2013 entitled “Replicating an evidence-based peer-led parenting program in Australia” Ref:http://www.aracy.org.au/publicationsresources/command/download_file/id/245/filepath/Replicating_an_evidence-based_peer-led_parenting_program_in_Australia.pdf

What is EPEC?
In contrast to professionally led parenting programs, this peer-led program is delivered by trained bicultural family mentors and parent peer educators, offered in community languages; the rationale being that often professionally led parenting programs may not gain impact in particularly disadvantaged communities compared to local, more culturally responsive programs. The program utilises the EPEC manual with standards around parent recruitment, training and monitoring. Parents are recruited to participate in the EPEC Being a Parent (BAP) course from existing playgroups in diverse communities, school community hubs, local CALD networks, Maternal and Child Health (MCH) and early year's services. The program enhances the capacity of recently arrived families through sharing of new and established insights, knowledge and understanding to support community connections and parent-child relationships.
Neighbourhood support for vulnerable families
The peer-led parenting group model is based on the Empowering Parents Empowering Communities (EPEC) program trialled in Australia and UK, that trains parents to deliver the ‘Being a Parent’ (BAP) course in their communities. The parenting course is delivered via a structured manual based on cognitive behavioural, social learning, attachment, structural and relational theories and methods. Parents learn to utilise different tools and skills to strengthen and enhance their parenting practices. The program includes parents determining their own parenting goals, selecting their own change strategies, evaluating their progress and rewarding themselves for goal attainment.

Guiding Principles in place-based implementation
- Integrated planning with local partners
- Cultural respect and acceptance of diversity of parenting styles
- Community co-production to encourage relevance to cultural needs
- Collaboration across community, local government and research partners
- Sustainability through embedded local activity and effective monitoring and reporting.

Expected outcomes of the program
- Parent peer educators and family mentors will report having increased knowledge and skills in parenting and are well-prepared and confident to deliver the Being a Parent (BAP) course in their communities.
- Vulnerable refugee and migrant families will participate in culturally responsive parenting programs and will report having gained skills and confidence in communicating with their children.

How will parents be recruited and supported to participate?
EPEC will leverage off the activities delivered by VICSEG in Hume and Brimbank over the past ten years including: family mentoring, facilitated playgroups, programs to enhance children’s development such as, supported playgroups, Learning Together parent and child English literacy programs, social support groups for asylum seeker parents and young children.

VICSEG placed-based teams of bicultural family mentors are well-known for their ability to engage vulnerable, socially isolated families. These workers have high level interpersonal and communication skills, sound knowledge and understanding of the needs of culturally diverse communities and local service networks. EPEC will further enhance their visibility and their capacity to engage more ‘hard to reach’, families and children from recently arrived communities.

VICSEG family mentors are para-professionals, with either graduate education from their country of origin, or Australia and/or children’s services diploma qualifications that combine local knowledge of community services with valuable bilingual and bicultural skills. They receive structured and regular supervision from VICSEG program management staff, from a range of professional disciplines including psychology, social work, early childhood and adult education.

International and Australian context
Many young children are at risk of poor education and health outcomes. More culturally responsive services are needed to support child and family development, learning, health and wellbeing and parenting in a culturally diverse Australian context. There is growing understanding amongst child and family services providers that to successfully engage, support and educate the most vulnerable and isolated families, programs must be presented in community languages, with consumer input into design and delivery.
The evidence for EPEC peer-led parenting groups identifies successful implementation with disadvantaged parents of 2–11-year-olds in the UK, (Day et al, 2012). EPEC offers:

- Significant reduction in children’s behaviour problems
- Improved competencies in ‘hard to reach’ parents
- Higher retention rates.

Tasmanian evidence (Winter 2013) identified that as a result of the EPEC program, communities are demonstrating increased social capacity around parenting skills.

**Being a Parent (BAP) courses**

- The 2-hour BAP sessions will be held on a weekly basis for 8 weeks during school terms, and include onsite child care delivered by qualified bilingual educators
- Each course will be co- facilitated by two trained and accredited bilingual parent peer educators.
- Courses will be delivered over an initial 18 month period in diverse communities, including Indian, Assyrian-Chaldean, Chin Burmese and Vietnamese
- The facilitators will be resourced by place-based EPEC program coordinators supervisors and will receive weekly supervision

**Anticipated benefits of BAP Program**

The BAP program is very respectful of different styles of parenting and provides additional tools and resources to support families in parenting in a new country and new culture. BAP does not dictate an alternative, or more superior/expert model /style of parenting to culturally diverse communities, but rather as a complementary resource to integrate into their parenting style. BAP also debunks myths held in some communities about ‘western style of parenting not valuing or believing in discipline when raising children. BAP demonstrates the importance of discipline and provides additional strategies to help implement discipline.

This is a unique, place-based parenting program recently introduced into Victoria across the two Communities for Children sites of Hume and Brimbank. BAP is delivered in community languages by peer educators in culturally diverse communities. Parents are heard, encouraged and affirmed in their parenting styles within their cultural context.

Over the years, VICSEG staff have observed and witnessed a significant disconnect between the values and accepted parenting norms of newly arrived refugee families and the mainstream children's service system, including maternal and child health, child care and education, kindergarten and primary school. The service system comes from an ‘expert’ position, where the parents are often ‘told’ what is best for their child. This style of service delivery creates disconnection, by reinforcing a power imbalance, which can get in the way of building trusting relationships with culturally diverse families. As a result, parents often lack the confidence to engage with mainstream service providers and only attend when they have to.

The BAP program provides a gateway and helps lay the foundations for mutually respectful relationships between local CALD communities and the children’s service sector.  BAP not only strengthens parents’ capacity to raise their children in their adopted new country, but also opens up opportunities for children to grow and thrive in their family’s language, culture and religion, whilst becoming active, contributing members of local communities in which they live.

**Contact for further information:**
Janet Elefsiniotis
VICSEG Community Programs Manager
jelefsiniotis@vicsegnewfutures.org.au – Tel. (03) 9353 9820
References:


City of Brimbank Early Years Plan (2011-2014)


McDonald, M O'Byrne, M and Pritchard, P (2015) Using the Family Partnership model to engage communities, lessons from the Tasmanian Child and Family Centres. Parkville: Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children’s Research Centre at the Royal Children’s Hospital


Smith Family (2015 -20190) Communities for Children Brimbank Community Strategic Plan

Thomson, S* Michelson D. † and Day†‡, C. (2014) from parent to ‘peer facilitator’: a qualitative study of a peer-led parenting programme, Child Care Health Dev. 2015 Jan; 41(1):76-83


Winter; R (2013) Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities (EPEC) Evaluation Report commissioned by The Murdoch Children’s Research Institute and funded by the Tasmanian Early Years Foundation

30 July 2015