



Child & Family

DID YOU KNOW?

25% (2011 Census) **of the BM population are children and young people (aged 0-19 years)** (population of 76,530)

- **32% of all households are couples with dependents** (20,386 families);
- **10%** of all households are one-parent families (3,000 households);

the average BM household size is 2.47 persons; **average number of children per family is 1.9.**

Neurobiological evidence shows that most brain development occurs during pregnancy and in the first three years of life and that children's brain development is driven more by experience than biology. **Children's most formative experiences are their relationships with significant others. Therefore, the earlier families are offered support, and the more this support meets all the child's and family's needs, the more effective the outcomes for the child.** (*Child & Family Plan: <http://www.strongerfamilies.co/child-and-family-plan.html>*).

Happy, healthy children, young people & families are the centre of our communities

Major brain development also occurs in adolescence, and older children & young people also need support, particularly when there are vulnerabilities that impact on children such as domestic violence, mental health issues, or bullying.

The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) is used in schools (kindergarten) nationally to assess children's development. While it is still too early to be definitive, **we are heartened by the reduction in vulnerabilities from 2009 to 2012: the 2009 AEDI indicated that 14% of BM kindergarten children were vulnerable in one developmental area (11.5% in 2012) and 5.3% were vulnerable in two or more developmental areas (4.3% in 2012).** The different development areas include physical, emotional, social, cognitive and language. To be rated 'vulnerable', children need to score in the bottom 10% of the AEDI test compared to other children.

Our Goals

- **Happy, healthy children, young people and families are the centre of our communities.** A community which focusses on the wellbeing of its children and young people from their earliest days will be a happy and healthy community. However, many families face significant vulnerabilities and challenges, and it is critical to intervene as early as possible to prevent damaged wellbeing.
- The Blue Mountains' 'ribbon development' of 27 towns and villages along 100 kilometres, means that it is challenging to provide all families with the services they need locally. There are many small non-government community services providing effective support to families in the Mountains.
- In the changing competitive funding environment, larger charities are often being awarded government funding - which threatens the sustainability of small BM NGOs which provide these place-based services. Some of the larger agencies being awarded tenders do not have established relationships and networks 'on the ground', or the engagement with the local community. They are often funded to provide broader regional services, with BM families and children often missing out on the quality programs they should be receiving.

- Services are also working with children and families with more complex needs than previously seen, or than they have been funded to support.
- Many partnerships have been formed over time to address this gap in resourcing, so services can try and address community needs. This is possible because these services have worked together for many years and have detailed local knowledge and have developed mutual respect (for example, the outstanding model of the Stronger Families Alliance - see below).

What We're Doing to Achieve Our Goals

- There are a wide range of services that work with families in the BM, including NSW Health (Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health District), Centrelink, Department of Human Services, GP's, Neighbourhood Centres, Family Support Services, Youth Services, Children's Services. Many of these are involved in the Stronger Families Alliance (SFA) which is convened by Blue Mountains City Council (which, along with MCRN, forms the Backbone organisation for the Alliance). This is a unique network (Collective Impact initiative) of more than 40 government, community agency, peak, civic and business organisations that fosters collaboration between child, youth, family and community organisations and groups.

What We're Doing to Achieve Our Goals (cont.):

The SFA has developed a strategic plan to improve child, youth, family and community outcomes in the BM; the Child, Youth and Family Plan has three key directions:

1. Strengthening families through neighbourhood service networks;
2. Moving children, young people and families beyond vulnerability;
3. Creating child- and youth-friendly communities.

📌 Many programs and initiatives are underway to implement the Child, Youth & Family Plan; eg:

- **School Community Hubs** are being run in 5 locations (from Mt Victoria to Blaxland), so that families can access strengths-based services, groups & activities locally; and so that services can increase their ability to work collaboratively.
- The sector has attracted specific **'Brighter Futures'** funds to work with families identified by the Department of Human Services as needing support.
- **Paint the Blue Read** early learning project runs regular activities across the BM to encourage parents and community members to read to, sing to, and say rhymes with babies from birth.
- **Bush Trackers** is an environmental education initiative designed to connect children and their families with 'the bush' and to promote the natural spaces within our local communities as 'child-friendly' places. Bush Trackers Guides (developed by kids themselves) create an opportunity for children & their families to seek and build an evolving relationship with nature simply by spending time in it and experiencing it on their own terms, through their own eyes. This is the beginning of something BIG, a relationship with nature which children can develop & nurture throughout their lives and can share with their family, friends and future generations.

📌 The following case study of a 17 year old school girl – who became pregnant and was in danger of having her child removed – illustrates the way many of these BM services worked together to support her:

'Mary' was 17 years old, and in her HSC year, when she fell pregnant. She already had significant learning challenges and now faced the daunting challenge of motherhood. Her teachers were concerned that she had not yet developed the necessary life skills to be able to care for herself and a child; however they had faith that with intensive support she and her boyfriend could learn to care for the child.

The school took a team approach to supporting 'Mary' - the school counsellor, class room teachers, teacher's aide and school principal were all involved in providing support at school, and contact was made with Parenting Young (a

project of MOCS [Mountains Outreach Community Service] that supports young parents and parents to be).

At the Parenting Young playgroup 'Mary' met workers from a range of services including Blue Mountains Youth Accommodation and Support Service (BMYASS), midwives from the local hospital, Centrelink, social workers from Community Health, and a Community Nurse. Importantly, 'Mary' developed friendships with other young mothers at the group who were able to give her emotional and practical support through this challenging time.

After the birth FACS (Department of Family and Community Services) had serious concerns about the baby's welfare (at this stage, the family were still homeless). 'Mary' was reluctant to engage with FACS as she feared that they would remove her child; she was intimidated by the language used by FACS case-workers and was overwhelmed at the thought of having to interact with so many services on her own. With support, 'Mary' was able to advocate for herself with FACS. BMYASS provided intensive support for the young family to find housing and furnish their new home.

Satisfied that 'Mary' was willing and able to gain support from the community sector, FACS closed her case. 'Mary' now receives case management from a Brighter Futures family support worker who is helping the family to develop the life skills necessary to give their child the best start in life. She continues to attend Parenting Young, and is now able to share her knowledge of the services she has used with other young mothers. She has a wonderful, strong, relationship with her child, who continues to grow and thrive.

✓ **How is State Government Contributing to These Achievements?**

- ✓ FACS (NSW Department of Family & Community Services) **Community Builders and Early Intervention & Prevention Programs** fund many of the community sector organisations involved in the Stronger Families Alliance in the BM, and the generalist services with which they and their clients interact. Community Builders also partially funds the Convenor (Backbone) position through local Council.
- ✓ FACS has provided consistency of membership, strategic leadership and support for the **Stronger Families Alliance since 2008.**

