Early Intervention for vulnerable young children and their families through the *Parents as Teachers* Program

**FINAL REPORT**

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
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<tr>
<td>CALD</td>
<td>Culturally and Linguistically Diverse</td>
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<td>CfC</td>
<td>Communities for Children</td>
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<td>CFC</td>
<td>Child and Family Centres</td>
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<td>PAT</td>
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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a research project on the impact of an early intervention initiative targeted at vulnerable young children and their families in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). The early intervention initiative uses the Parents as Teachers (PAT) Program as a vehicle for the delivery of parenting education and other services to the parents or carers of vulnerable children from birth to three years of age.

The research team aimed to understand the factors that influence the participation of families with vulnerable young children in this parent education program.

Research Methods

The findings are based on analysis of administrative data as well as data collected through interviews with policy personnel, parent advisors and parents of vulnerable young children who are clients of the Parents as Teachers Program. The researchers also accompanied the parent advisors on home visits to observe the delivery of the program to parents of vulnerable young children, for the purposes of this study. Relevant literature from the ACT, Australia and overseas guided the design of the study and informed the findings.

Early intervention for vulnerable young children

There is a wealth of evidence indicating the importance of the quality of parenting and primary care to the development of young children. An effective parent education program can be expected to enhance the learning environment within which a child will develop for at least 15 years. Thus early interventions focused on educating parents when children are very young should have a positive impact on the developmental outcomes of vulnerable children over the long term.

There is now a range of services offering early childhood education (including parent education) and family support during the early years in Australia and overseas, some of which are targeted to vulnerable young children and their families under the age of four years. These early intervention programs usually involve professionals and paraprofessionals visiting the homes of families with vulnerable children, to provide parents or carers with information, emotional support, access to other services, and help with parenting practices through their multiple roles of being literacy teachers, parenting coaches and role models.

The delivery of the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program in the context of the Child and Family Centres network is consistent with these models of early intervention. Delivered by the Early Intervention and Prevention Service through the ACT Child and Family Centres, the program expects parent advisors to link clients to a comprehensive array of support services in addition to parent education. These additional features should increase the program’s effectiveness, particularly in meeting the needs of parents of vulnerable young children.
The Parents as Teachers (PAT) Program

As a home-based educational program, the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program adheres to recognised good practice principles for the delivery of parent education to the families of vulnerable young children. The program provides an extensive curriculum delivered by trained professionals to parents at home on a regular basis during the first three years of a child’s life. The program’s delivery is structured around regular sessions of approximately one hour, and the program’s resources can be customised to meet the needs of clients and their children. The program aims to empower parents by enhancing their knowledge and skills in regard to parenting. The individualised nature of the program enables the parent and parent advisor to address issues of concern to them as they arise. According to the program’s philosophy, the parent’s unique knowledge of their own child is respected, and he or she works in partnership with the parent adviser towards achieving the program outcomes.

North American research indicates that when disadvantaged families participate in the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program, there are positive outcomes for children in terms of fewer child injuries, increased rates of immunisation, improved language and literacy development and social behaviour, as well as improved parent attitudes and happiness in caring for the child. Long-term educational benefits for disadvantaged children have also been reported, particularly among children whose families engage with the program at an intense level. These outcomes are attributed to the program’s focus on improving the ability of parents to provide a home learning environment designed to enhance their child’s spontaneous problem solving and persistence on novel tasks.

Program evaluations and administrative data from exit surveys of participants over the past seven years indicate that the Parents as Teachers (PAT) Program in the ACT is highly valued by parents for its key program elements, particularly the program’s focus on developing the skills and confidence of parents in regard to their child’s development. Key program features such as the child-focused nature of the program, its flexibility, and its activity-based curriculum were all nominated as strengths by respondents to exit surveys conducted since 2003. The exit surveys also indicate a consistently high level of satisfaction with the program among parents over the past decade. The majority of program participants recommend that the Program should be offered more widely so that more new parents have the opportunity to participate.

The Parents as Teachers (PAT) Program as an early intervention strategy

A major barrier to the delivery of parent education programs to the families of vulnerable young children is the difficulty of targeting the program to the most vulnerable clients and ensuring their continuing engagement. In delivering the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program in the ACT, the Early Intervention and Prevention Service has implemented several features that aim to maximise the engagement of ‘hard-to-reach’ families, including:

- Access to the program is limited to families which meet criteria of disadvantage;
- The program is delivered through scheduled home visits, with reminder calls and flexibility regarding rescheduling;
- The parent advisor is the same person, as far as practicable, throughout the three years of the program;
The program is delivered in the context of the Child and Family Centre network, so that client’s needs for other services can be addressed as they arise.

These features help to ensure that the *Parents as Teachers (PAT)* Program in the ACT is well-targeted to vulnerable young children and fosters their families’ long-term engagement in the program.

**Reaching the ‘hard-to-reach’**

The *Parents as Teachers (PAT)* program in the ACT targets vulnerable young children and their families by requiring program participants to meet criteria of disadvantage. The professional training required to deliver *Parents as Teachers (PAT)* program equips parent advisors with the skills to deliver the program to clients with complex needs. However delivering the program to clients with complex needs remains a professional challenge for parent advisors. While many ‘bridging strategies’ to maximise the engagement of ‘hard-to-reach’ clients are employed, such as being flexible about rescheduling and always making a reminder call before the home visit is due, these strategies are not always effective and some clients remain difficult to engage. However the parent advisors report many instances where their persistence (and flexibility) has paid off. They also report that once they have gained a client’s trust, engagement in the program is more assured.

**What parents of vulnerable young children value about the program**

Parents of vulnerable children who participated in the interviews were of varying ages and in different circumstances, however their views of the program’s benefits were quite similar, converging on three main themes: addressing feelings of isolation; improving their confidence and skills in parenting; and helping them to access other services. In discussing how the program provided these benefits, all participants emphasised the value of home visits, thus reinforcing the importance of home visits as a bridging strategy for engaging ‘hard-to-reach’ clients. The relationship of trust established with the parent advisor appeared to be particularly important to parents of vulnerable children in maintaining their engagement in the program, as well as the ‘non-judgmental’ way in which the program’s content was delivered.

**Key program features for engaging families with vulnerable young children in parent education**

From this study, several features of the *Parents as Teachers (PAT)* program and the way it is delivered in the ACT emerged as important in terms of engaging parents of vulnerable young children in parent education. The features praised most often by parents were: home visits; the relationship of trust with a parent advisor; and the support provided in accessing other services.

**Home visits** are an important bridging strategy in engaging ‘hard-to-reach’ clients. Home visits also enhance the delivery of the parent education curriculum. From observing the child in a family context, the parent advisor has a much richer source of data to inform her advice on parenting issues and to customise the program delivery to suit the client’s needs.

The importance of the relationship of trust between the parent advisor and the client must be acknowledged as a key factor in engaging parents of vulnerable young children in parent education through the *Parents as Teachers (PAT)* Program. While the training and professional development requirements of the program provide aim to assure the quality of parent advisors, additional
professional learning for parent advisors could be provided through monitoring client feedback, peer support among parent advisors and mentoring arrangements.

As the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program in the ACT is delivered by the Early Intervention and Prevention Service in the Child and Family Centre network, clients’ needs for access to other services can be addressed as they arise. While parent advisors noted that the need to address other issues often got in the way of the delivery of the parent education component of the program, they all acknowledged that the parent education would not be delivered unless these issues were addressed. Thus the parent advisors are equipped with the skills to link program clients to additional forms of support. This feature of the program was highly valued by the parents of vulnerable children in this study.
Introduction

This report presents the findings of a study of an early intervention initiative for vulnerable young children and their families implemented by the Office of Children, Youth and Family Support within the Disability, Housing and Community Services Directorate of the ACT government in Canberra, Australia. The initiative involves providing parent education and support services through the Parents as Teachers (PAT) Program to vulnerable children and their families from birth to three years of age. The ACT government has delivered the PAT program to Canberra families for a decade. In recent years, the PAT program has been targeted specifically to vulnerable children and their families and delivered in the context of the ACT government’s network of Child and Family Centres.

With financial support from the Ian Potter Foundation, in 2011 the Education Institute conducted a study examining the delivery of the Parents as Teachers program in the context of the Child and Family Centre network, with a view to understanding its impact on vulnerable young children and their families in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). The aim of the research was to investigate the extent to which a parent education program such as Parents as Teachers (PAT) is effective in engaging the parents and carers of vulnerable young children in an early intervention initiative over a sustained period of time. The PAT program and similar types of parent education programs are increasingly common as an educational intervention for vulnerable young children between the ages of birth and four years in both Australia and overseas. By examining the factors that influence the participation of families with vulnerable young children in the PAT program, the researchers aim to assist policy makers to target early intervention programs more effectively to vulnerable young children.

Research method

The study analysed data drawn from a range of sources, including policy documents, previous research and evaluations, exit surveys of clients, observations of home visits and interviews with program staff and clients.

First the research team conducted a review of relevant literature on vulnerable young children and their families. This included policy documents and international research articles, including data collected on the impact of the Parents as Teachers (PAT) Program overseas. These secondary sources of data informed the analysis of the primary data collected for the study.

The staff at the Child and Family Centre in Tuggeranong provided the project team with access to several documents related to the Parents as Teachers Program to allow us to gain an appreciation of the development of the program in the ACT. These documents included previous evaluation reports and Parents as Teachers promotional materials. From these documents, we were able to build a good understanding of the philosophy underpinning the program and of how the program is implemented in the ACT.

In the ACT, when their child turns three and is no longer eligible for Parents as Teachers home visits, clients are asked to complete an ‘exit survey’. We were given 76 de-identified exit surveys completed by parents between 2003 and 2011. The questionnaires included both forced-choice questions and open-ended questions giving parents the opportunity to share their general
impressions of the program. The data from these exit surveys provided useful insights into how past parents have responded to the program and what they valued about the program, which we compared with data collected for this project from parent interviews and observations.

The study involved collecting primary data for analysis from three sources: parents of vulnerable children who are clients of the Parents as Teachers program; parent advisors who deliver the program; and policy personnel.

**Parents**

Data were gathered from the parents in the *Parents as Teachers* program via two sources: observations while accompanying the Parent advisor on a home visit; and semi-structured interviews with parents. The parent advisor recruited parents for both the home visits and the semi-structured interviews. The research team accompanied the Parent advisor on five home visits and conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with parents: four parents consented to both the home visits and interviews, one parent consented to a researcher attending a home visit but not an interview and 14 parents consented to an interview. The interview questions are provided in Appendix A.1. A description of the home visits is provided in Appendix A.2.

The majority of the parents involved in the study had the same parent advisor, two parents had a different parent advisor; and two parents had had more than one parent advisor during their time on the program. The majority of the parents involved in the study were female (16), reflecting the fact that the majority of parents involved in the Program are mothers. On one occasion both parents were present during and contributed to the interview. Two parents were from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Six of the parents were partnered and at least another two were living with their partners when their child was born. Four of the parents were teenagers when their child was born. Three parents had three children, four parents had two children and 10 parents had just one child. Brief profiles of the parents (we use pseudonyms rather than actual names) are provided in Appendix B.

The five home visits were conducted in the clients’ homes during a regularly scheduled parent advisor visits. The researchers were careful not to disrupt the normal schedules and fitted in with the requests of the parents and the parent advisor. Only one researcher accompanied the parent advisor on each of the home visits. Researcher 1 completed three visits and Researcher 2 completed two visits. Whilst observing the interactions between the parent, the parent advisor and the child, the researchers did not take notes, however, she wrote up her observations and thoughts as soon as possible after each visit. The researchers chose not to take notes during the visits as they felt that this may distract the parents and make them feel less comfortable about having a stranger in their home.

The interviews with parents were held at either the Child and Family Centre or the client’s home depending on the client’s preference. Some parents felt more comfortable being interviewed in the Child and Family Centre whereas other parents preferred to be interviewed at home. The interviews lasted for between 20 and 40 minutes. On most occasions, both researchers attended the interview, one taking on the role of the interviewer and the other taking on the role of the note taker. Due to difficulties in scheduling the interviews to fit in with the clients, on four occasions, only one researcher was present. Rather than record the interviews, notes were taken during the interviews. The researchers felt that the clients may be less willing to participate and speak freely if they were
being recorded. Several of the interviewees have mental health issues and some demonstrated a mistrust of people asking questions.

**Parent advisors and policy personnel**

The researchers conducted seven interviews with staff members involved in the *Parents as Teachers* program: five *Parents as Teachers* parent advisors, one supervisor and one manager. During the interviews, staff members were encouraged to talk about the program and its perceived strengths and weaknesses. The interviews were conducted in the workplaces and lasted about half an hour each. Notes were taken by both the interviewer and the note taker. See Appendix A for the interview questions.

**Ethical issues**

The primary intent of the research was to interview parents of vulnerable young children who were eligible for the *Parents as Teachers* Program. Although none of the participants were under 18 years of age, some were from CALD backgrounds, some may have been in dependent or unequal relationships, some may have been pregnant, some may have mental health problems or a disability, some may have been Indigenous or some may have been possibly involved in illegal activity. While children were present during the home visits and some of the interviews, they were not participants and were not interviewed. Children under three years of age were observed during the home visits but they were in the company of their parents. The investigators did not directly interact with the children.

Before having any contact with the researchers, the parents were fully informed about the research project by the *Parents as Teachers* parent advisor who acted as the gatekeeper in the recruitment process. Participants were given a letter detailing the aims of the project and what their involvement entailed prior to the home visits/interviews. After they read the letter and signed the consent form, the researcher reminded them that they were free to withdraw from the project at any time and that they had the right to use a free counselling service if they experienced any emotional discomfort from participating in the research. The researchers assigned pseudonyms to all transcripts and notes to protect the privacy of all participants. There were no recordings, audio or video, and no photographs were taken.

The research design and research materials were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Canberra prior to the project’s commencement.

**Analysis**

The findings of the literature review were summarised and are presented in the first section of this report, followed by a detailed description of the Parents as Teachers program in section two. An analysis of previous evaluations and administrative data from the exit surveys over the past decade is presented in section three. A thematic analysis of qualitative data collected in interviews is presented in section four. These analyses are guided by the research questions for the study:

1. What factors facilitate the participation of parents/carers of vulnerable young children in the PAT program as delivered through the Child and Family Centre network in the ACT?

2. What elements of the PAT program and its delivery are valued most by parents and carers of vulnerable young children?
3. What features of the program or its delivery appear critical to ensuring the ongoing engagement of vulnerable young children and their families in this early intervention initiative?

In presenting the findings of this study, this report aims to contribute to the evidence base about early interventions to enhance the developmental outcomes of vulnerable young children through parent education.
1 Early intervention for vulnerable young children

Interventions to support the physical and cognitive development of vulnerable young children during the early years of life are critical to improving their educational, social and economic outcomes in the longer term. The early years of life – especially the first three years – are now recognized as having an important influence on a child’s long-term health and development. As major physical and brain development takes place before the age of three, the early childhood years can be either a window of opportunity (for enriching human development) or a window of vulnerability, where social stressors such as poverty or family dysfunction contribute to developmental delay (Willms 2001). The provision of support to vulnerable children and their families during the first years of life is increasingly recognised as crucial to increasing parental competence and reducing the social and environmental risks to vulnerable children’s development (Heckman 2006).

Developmental delay in the first three years of life can result in poor language skills and motor control that impedes literacy and numeracy acquisition when the child starts school. A low level of achievement in literacy and numeracy is disempowering and prevents people from participating fully in society. It is associated with lack of engagement in school, lower levels of retention to Year 12, lower tertiary entrance scores and higher rates of unemployment (Rothman and McMillan 2003). Recent research in the field of neuroscience also suggests that the stress associated with living in childhood poverty reduces the capacity of an individual’s working memory, contributing to the lower school achievement rates of children from economically and socially disadvantaged families (Evans and Schamberg 2009).

Vulnerable children are defined as children at risk of having poor cognitive and behavioural outcomes during their early years that will render them more vulnerable to low educational achievement at school, and unemployment and poor physical and mental health as young adults. Vulnerable children are present in all social groups but are more prevalent among families within the lowest quartile of family income (Willms 2001).

Early intervention programs targeted at vulnerable children well before they start school have been shown to produce long-term benefits in the areas of: cognitive/emotional development (such as IQ and behaviour); education (reading and maths attainment and high school retention); economic well-being (employment and income); and health (Karoly et al. 2005). In the US, findings from an evaluation of the Early Head Start program reported that children in the program were less likely to visit the doctor/hospital for accidents and injuries; were more likely to have been immunized; had better nutrition and health outcomes and had more secure attachment relationships than other children (Raikes et al. 2006).

Increasingly, governments are offering early childhood education and family support programs during the early years, some of which are targeted to vulnerable young children and their families under the age of four years. These early intervention programs usually involve professionals and paraprofessionals visiting the homes of families with vulnerable children, to provide parents or carers with information, emotional support, access to other services, and help with parenting
practices through their multiple roles of being literacy teachers, parenting coaches and role models (Brookes-Gunn et al. 2006; Howard and Brooks-Gunn 2009).

A large contemporary Australian study indicates positive benefits of implementing early childhood interventions focused on vulnerable children. The Communities for Children (CfC) initiative was one of three models of service delivery funded under the Australian Government’s Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2004–2009 which was targeted to improving the coordination of services for vulnerable children between birth and five years. Under the CfC initiative, the Federal Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) funded non-government organisations as ‘Facilitating Partners’ in 45 disadvantaged geographic areas around Australia to develop and implement a whole-of-community approach to enhancing early childhood development.

An evaluation of the SFCS measured changes in child, family and community outcomes in CfC communities over the funding period, and potentially beyond. The effects of the CfC initiative were estimated using statistical techniques that allowed child, family and community outcomes in the CfC sites to be compared to what they would have been in the absence of the CfC intervention (using outcomes in the contrast sites). The outcomes measures related to child health and well-being; child emotional and behavioural outcomes; child physical and mental health; parenting practices, parenting self-efficacy and parenting self-confidence; parenting relationship conflict; and parent employment status. The study evaluated the effects of the Communities for Children (CfC) program focusing on the ‘hard-to-reach’ families in 15 disadvantaged communities. Ten of the communities were included in the CfC intervention and the other five communities were used as a comparison group. The researchers collected data at three time points and found that after the intervention program, there were improvements in children’s early receptive vocabulary and verbal ability, parents in the CfC communities were less likely to use hostile/harsh parenting, and mothers were more involved in community service activities (Edwards et al. 2009).

While the effect sizes of the CfC initiative on all outcomes were small, they were comparable to, if not greater than, effect sizes identified in other studies of early childhood interventions. Interestingly, the positive effects were evident irrespective of whether parents and children in the CfC communities had actually received services. This might have been because the CfC initiative resulted in a better coordinated local system of early childhood services or that it provided other enhancements to the broader community context in which children develop (Edwards et al. 2009). It is also feasible that the delivery of early intervention services to some families within a community would, through community and family networks, deliver flow-on effects to other families in the community.

The CfC program was modelled on the successful Sure Start program introduced in 1999 in the UK to tackle child poverty and improve child and family services (Edwards et al. 2009). Sure Start was a multi-faceted interagency early intervention program which targeted young children (those aged under 4 years) and their families and local communities. The program aimed to improve the social and emotional development of children; improve the health of children; improve children’s ability to learn; and to strengthen families (Bagley 2011). Other early intervention programs targeting vulnerable children and their families currently being conducted in Australia include: Let’s Read - an early literacy program; Brighter Futures - a multiple strategy program diverting families from the child protection system (Hilferty and Redmond 2010); and the Parents as Teachers program.
This report presents the findings of a study of an early intervention initiative for vulnerable young children and their families implemented by the Office of Children, Youth and Family Support within the Disability, Housing and Community Services Directorate of the ACT government in Canberra, Australia. The initiative involves delivering a home-based parent education and support service through the Parents as Teachers (PAT) Program to vulnerable children and their families from birth to three years of age.

The ACT government has delivered the PAT program to Canberra families for a decade. In recent years, however, the PAT program has been targeted specifically to vulnerable children and their families and delivered in the context of the ACT government’s network of Child and Family Centres. This change has seen the support elements of the program increase as Parent advisors are expected to help parents/carers address issues that may be having a negative impact on the child’s home environment, such as financial, housing and relationship issues. Therefore, in addition to focusing on the parent education and child development component of the PAT program, the Parent advisor uses the home visit to refer the client to other support services when needed, such as facilitated playgroups, financial and welfare services, counselling and health services. Most of these services are offered through the Child and Family Centres where the Parent advisors are also based.

1.1 Parent education as an early intervention strategy

‘Environments that do not stimulate the young and fail to cultivate cognitive and non-cognitive skills at early ages place children at an early disadvantage’ (Heckman 2006: 1900).

Parenting education is increasingly used as an early intervention strategy in recognition of the overwhelming influence of the home environment on a child’s development. The nature and quality of the parenting or primary care that children receive is a key factor influencing their physical, cognitive and social/emotional development. Research suggests that the developmental trajectories of children depend on the interaction between the characteristics of the child, the family and their economic and social environment (Edwards et al. 2009). Thus early intervention initiatives that seek to influence the quality of parenting and primary care, particularly in the first three years of life, have the potential for delivering sustainable results in terms of improved child development outcomes over the long term, compared to other types of early interventions. International research suggests that parents engaged in early intervention programs have more supportive interactions with their children; are less likely to use violent disciplinary methods; provide more stimulating activities for their children and experience less parenting stress than other parents (Brookes-Gunn et al. 2006; Raikes et al. 2006; Sweet and Applebaum 2004).

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) define good parenting as including ‘a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfilment and good citizenship’ (cited in Cullen 2011: 4). Melhuish and others (2008) developed a home learning index comprising 14 activities to measure the effect of the home learning environment on young children aged 3-7 years: playing with friends at home, playing with friends elsewhere, visiting relatives or friends, shopping with parent, watching TV, eating meals with family, going to the library, playing with letters/numbers; painting or drawing, being read to, learning activities with the alphabet, numbers/shapes and songs/poems/nursery rhymes, as well as having a regular bedtime. The results of this UK study showed that children from high quality home learning environments were more
likely to be over-achievers in literacy whereas children from lower quality home learning environments were more likely to be underachievers in literacy. Melhuish’s team also found that low-SES homes sometimes scored higher on the home learning environment measure than high SES homes, indicating that poverty is not strongly associated with poor quality parenting.

Other studies have found similar results indicating a link between home learning environments and long-term developmental outcomes. For example, a study conducted in the UK showed that the home learning environment was one of the strongest predictors of high attainment in reading at age 10 once child and family factors were controlled (Anders et al. 2011). Similarly, a study led by Siraj-Blatchford (2008) showed that the quality of the home learning environment had a stronger effect on intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income.

The positive influence of the home learning environment on literacy skills is related to a higher level of parental engagement in home learning activities such as teaching children songs and nursery rhymes, reading to young children, playing with letters and numbers, drawing and painting (Sammons et al. 2004:705). Senechal and LeFevre (2002: 457) argue that ‘shared book reading supported children’s receptive language development’ therefore, parent involvement in early literacy skills underpin ‘children’s acquisition of the mechanics of reading’. Rodriguez and Tamis-La Monda (2011: 1070) concluded that there was a strong association between learning environments and the prekindergarten vocabulary and emergent literacy skills of young children. Furthermore, they found that home learning environments did not change, therefore ‘children who experienced supportive learning environments at 15 months were likely to continue to experience such environments through the age of 5’.

In summary, there is a wealth of evidence indicating the importance of the quality of parenting and primary care on the development of young children (Anders et al. 2011; Edwards et al. 2009; Heckman 2006; Janus and Duku 2007; Melhuish et al. 2008; Noble et al. 2005; Rodriguez and Tamis-La Monda 2011; Sammons et al. 2004; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2008;). As an effective parent education program can be expected to enhance the learning environment within which a child will remain for at least 15 years, early intervention programs focused on parent education should have the greatest impact on the child’s development. Thus we would expect considerable long-term benefits from the provision of parent education programs as an early intervention strategy for vulnerable young children during the first three years of life.

1.2 The challenge of delivering parent education to ‘hard-to-reach’ families

The children most vulnerable to developmental delay are often in families where, for a range of reasons, their parents or carers are unable or unwilling to engage in parenting education programs. Although children in these ‘hard-to-reach’ families, are often the most in need of early intervention services, they are also the least likely to access them. The reasons why ‘hard-to-reach’ families are unable or unwilling to engage in parent education programs are complex. Corlin et al. (2009), define three main reasons why hard-to-reach families do not engage with support services:

1. families are marginalised, economically disadvantaged or socially excluded and thus disengaged from many kinds of opportunities, including social programs;
2. families are overlooked because service providers fail to cater for their needs; and

3. families choose not to engage with services because they are wary about service involvement.

Children living in families which are mobile, itinerant or homeless; or who have parents who are mentally or physically ill, abuse substances, are disabled or are teenagers; as well as those who are indigenous or from culturally and linguistically diverse groups are more at risk of growing up in ‘hard-to-reach’ families. While such children are likely to be most in need of early intervention services, they are also the least likely to receive them and are thus more vulnerable to poor educational and developmental outcomes.

A key challenge for policy makers is to design and deliver early intervention programs in a way that maximises the potential for engagement among ‘hard-to-reach’ families by addressing the reasons for disengagement, particularly in the initial recruitment stage but also throughout the program delivery cycle.

At the initial recruitment stage, ensuring that the program is effectively targeted at vulnerable young children is critical. An ongoing problem with attempting to target the provision of early childhood intervention programs to those most in need is that a parent education service is likely to be valued by many parents outside of the target group, who have an incentive to ‘self-select’ their participation. Thus the children most likely to participate in early childhood programs are from higher socio-economic groups (Hayes et al. 2008). Even when programs are located in identified disadvantaged communities and targeted at vulnerable children and their families, often it is the relatively more advantaged families within these communities who consent to participate (Edwards et al. 2009). In the ACT, the Parents as Teachers program is targeted to clients classified as disadvantaged in terms of having one or more of the following characteristics: has been reported to Child Protection authorities; is living in assisted (crisis) accommodation; has experienced teenage parenthood; has a history of substance or alcohol abuse; is unemployed; suffers from a mental illness; has experienced family violence; is socially or geographically isolated; or has a low level of formal educational attainment.

When the program delivery is expected to last for several years, a major impediment to retaining the engagement of ‘hard-to-reach’ families is their high level of mobility. These families are the most likely to move out of the program’s jurisdiction. This impediment is currently beyond the scope of most government services to address, because early intervention services are usually provided within local, regional or state boundaries.

A second barrier to the long-term engagement of ‘hard-to-reach’ families in parent education programs can be a general resistance on the part of parents/carers to engagement with government service providers. While scheduling home-visits is a key strategy to address this reluctance, for a range of reasons (including mental health issues) parents and carers in ‘hard-to-reach’ families are often not at home when appointments are scheduled or do not answer the door. Common ‘bridging’ strategies to engage ‘hard-to-reach’ families include making routine telephone reminders of appointments and being flexible regarding changing appointments (Corlin et al. 2009). These bridging strategies are used by the parent advisors delivering the Parents as Teachers Program operating through the Child and Family Centre network in the ACT.
Maximising the continuity of parent advisors is another important strategy to secure the long-term engagement of ‘hard-to-reach’ families because resistance to engagement is less likely to persist if a relationship of trust has developed between the parent advisor and the client. When Woolfolk and Unger (2009) examined the relationships between parents and parent educators involved in the Parents as Teachers Program, they found that for many mothers, the parent educator had become a friend and was considered ‘part of the family’. While prior negative experiences with social service systems affected the willingness of some mothers to engage with the program, the parent educators who were flexible and able to address the needs of the families as they arose became trusted friends with whom the parents were willing to discuss their concerns.

While home-visiting programs are increasingly recognised as valuable forms of parent education, they are particularly useful means of targeting vulnerable children and their families. If delivered in a way that addresses the issues that prevent ‘hard-to-reach’ families from accessing parent education services, home-visiting programs are the most likely to deliver maximum engagement with targeted clients over a sustained period of time. When a parent education program such as Parents as Teachers (PAT) can be delivered in the home to families with vulnerable children, its many benefits can be realised, such as:

- facilitating improvements in the home learning environments of the children in recognition of the fact that this is where they spend most of their time (Brookes-Gunn et al. 2006; Korfmacher et al. 2008);
- promoting whole-family involvement (rather than simply the primary carer) in the program, and thus strengthening the effects of the intervention;
- building rapport between the family and one parent educator which is particularly important for families who may have difficulty forming trusting relationships with agency staff (Brookes-Gunn et al. 2006);
- supporting parents’ access to the program because parents do not have to make arrangements for transportation, childcare or time off from work (Sweet and Applebaum 2004);
- increasing awareness on the part of the agency about the factors that might be impeding the family’s capacity to participate in the program and enabling the agency to assist in addressing them.

The delivery of the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program in the ACT has many features that aim to maximise the engagement of ‘hard-to-reach’ families, including:

- Access to the program is limited to families which meet criteria of disadvantage;
- The program is delivered through scheduled home visits, with reminder calls and flexibility regarding rescheduling;
- The Parent advisor is the same person, as far as practicable, throughout the three years of the program;
- The program is delivered in the context of the Child and Family Centre network, so that clients’ needs for other services can be addressed as they arise.
As the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program in the ACT is delivered by the Early Intervention and Prevention Service, the role of the parent advisor is broader than simply delivering the parent education curriculum through home-visits. In addition to delivering the parent education element of the PAT program, the parent advisor uses the home-visits to identify other issues that may be influencing the quality of the home environment and the child’s developmental context. The parent advisor is expected to help address these issues by linking PAT clients to relevant services, many of which are provided through the Child and Family Centre network. Through the Child and Family Centre network, PAT clients have access to an extensive array of support services such as crisis housing, counselling, health services, and targeted playgroups. Thus the parent advisor performs the dual roles of providing parent education as well as parent support.

The decision to deliver the PAT program in this extended context was based on the experience that vulnerable children and their families usually face a range of pressing issues that, if not addressed, impede the effectiveness of the parent education component of the PAT program. For example, if a child’s parents are facing eviction, or do not have enough food, they are unlikely to be receptive to a visit from a parent advisor that focuses solely on parent education and child development. Thus parent advisors are equipped with the skills to assist clients in addressing any pressing issues that are likely to impede the effectiveness of the PAT program delivery, and regularly incorporate relevant advice and referrals into their monthly visits.

1.3 Summary

There is a wealth of evidence indicating the importance of the quality of parenting and primary care to the development of young children. An effective parent education program can be expected to enhance the learning environment within which a child will develop for at least 15 years. Thus early interventions focused on educating parents when children are very young should have a positive impact on the developmental outcomes of vulnerable children over the long term.

There is now a range of services offering early childhood education (including parent education) and family support during the early years in Australia and overseas, some of which are targeted to vulnerable young children and their families under the age of four years. These early intervention programs usually involve professionals and paraprofessionals visiting the homes of families with vulnerable children, to provide parents or carers with information, emotional support, access to other services, and help with parenting practices through their multiple roles of being literacy teachers, parenting coaches and role models.

The delivery of the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program in the context of the Child and Family Centres network is consistent with these models of early intervention. Delivered by the Early Intervention and Prevention Service through the ACT Child and Family Centres, the program expects parent advisors to link clients to a comprehensive array of support services in addition to parent education. These additional features should increase the program’s effectiveness, particularly in meeting the needs of parents of vulnerable young children.
2 The *Parents as Teachers* Program

The *Parents as Teachers (PAT)* program is a family education and support program developed in the USA and delivered in Australia through licensed affiliates. The goals of the Program are to:

1. Increase parent knowledge of early childhood development and improve parenting practices;
2. Provide early detection of developmental delays and health issues;
3. Prevent child abuse and neglect; and
4. Increase children’s school readiness and school success.

The *Parents as Teachers* program pursues these goals through a structured program of home-visits focused on parent education, parent-child interaction and child observation during the first three years of a child’s life. Home visits are usually monthly but can be delivered more regularly (eg. weekly) if required. Through the regular home visits of roughly an hour’s duration, a trained Parent advisor aims to strengthen parent-child relationship by providing information directly to families about parenting skills, parent-child interactions and child development in a session focused totally on the child. The child is an active participant in every session as well as being the focus of the discussion between the parent advisor and the parent. During the hour-long home visit, the parent advisor will model good parenting practices, coach clients on parenting practices and engage clients in parent-child activities designed to foster observation of child development and promote positive parent-child interaction (Parents as Teachers National Center 2012).

2.1 Program philosophy

The *Parents as Teachers* program aims to support parents in developing the key parenting behaviours of: nurturing; designing/guiding; responding; communicating; and supporting learning. This approach is based on the assumption that parents are well-placed to provide the kinds of experiences that lay the groundwork for their child’s development in terms of learning, relationships, motor functions and social/emotional growth. The program is tailored to meet the needs of the client family rather than being administered as a one-size-fits-all program. Parents are encouraged to develop an awareness of their child’s likes and dislikes and to play with their child to establish a warm and trusting parent-child relationship.

The core values of the *Parents as Teachers* program include:

- That the early years of a child’s life are critical for optimal development and provide the foundation for success in school and in life;
- That parents are their child’s first and most influential teachers;
- That established and emerging research should be the foundation of parent education and family support curricula, training, materials and services; and
That all young children and their families deserve the same opportunities to succeed, regardless of any demographic, geographic or economic considerations.

The core services of the Parents as Teachers program include:

- Providing age-appropriate child development information to parents in a personal, individualised home environment;
- Assisting parents to learn how to observe their own child;
- Addressing clients’ parenting concerns;
- Engaging the child’s parent and family in activities that provide meaningful parent-child interaction;
- Providing developmental, health, vision and hearing screening of child to identify issues early;
- Identifying parent strengths and abilities as well as areas of concern that may require referral for follow-up services;
- Providing access to and helping families identify and connect with resources offered by other organisations that serve families.

The home visits are generally provided on a monthly basis, however more frequent or less frequent visits can be accommodated, depending upon each family’s needs. Visits are usually between one to one and a half hours in duration. Each home visit provides information about child development from the Born to Learn® Curriculum provided through the Parents as Teachers Program. The home visits are conducted by suitably qualified staff and provide the opportunity for the parents and parent advisors to develop trusting relationships over a long period of time [up to 36 months]. The advisor tailors the program to the individual needs of each family and works to empower the parents through education and training in various aspects of child development.

The parent advisors delivering the Parents as Teachers program all hold relevant qualifications and have extensive experience either in early childhood education, nursing or social work. They have also undertaken a specialised training course provided by accredited trainers. Ongoing supervision is provided by a trained Parent as Teachers supervisor and extra training is provided on an annual basis to update and further develop relevant professional skills. Parent advisors seek to develop trusting relationships with the parents so that when issues arise, parents are more likely to discuss their concerns with the adviser and can thus be linked to other services such as medical specialists, physiotherapists and speech therapists when required.

2.2 Program delivery

In delivering the Parents as Teachers program through home visits, parent advisors draw on resources from the program’s Born to Learn® curriculum, a comprehensive set of materials based on research evidence about parent education and child development. For each month of a child’s age, parent advisors have a choice of several session plans on different topics (eg. fine motor skills; language development; active play; gross motor skills; sleep; transitions). Each session plan offers the parent advisor a process to follow in conducting the session, and identifies the activities that the
parent advisor should initiate to promote parent-child interaction and parent observation. Each session plan also includes Parent Handouts summarising a topic which the parent advisor can leave with the parent at the end of the session. The Parent Handouts are presented at three levels of language difficulty, to facilitate access among clients with low levels of language literacy.

During the home visit, parent advisors are expected to observe the child and to note when developmental milestones are met. While Parent advisors can select a session plan that is most appropriate to the client’s needs and interests, they are also free to draw on a number of session plans to compile a customised session. However a clear expectation of the program is that during each session, the parent advisor will:

1) observe the child and parent-child interactions throughout the session;
2) engage the parent in a focused two-way conversation about the child’s development and related issues;
3) engage the parent in a relevant parent-child activity and explain why the activity is important; and
4) ask the parent to undertake a specific follow-up activity in the time between visits.

In concluding the session, parent advisors are expected to:

- summarise the session with one or two key observations about the child’s development;
- point out a strength of the parent; and
- provide additional resource materials for the parent to use between sessions.

The Parents as Teachers program is highly structured in the sense that parent advisors are expected to perform a set number of tasks per session. However the advisor is provided with an extensive set of resources from which to choose a focus topic around which to construct each session. To help empower parents, the program is highly individualised in a way that enables the parent advisor and the parent to prioritise and address the most pressing issues in their own particular circumstances. At the same time, the program provides a comprehensive curriculum that aims to assist clients to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to parent successfully. Throughout this process the parent’s unique knowledge of their own child is respected, and he or she works in partnership with the parent adviser towards achieving the program goals.

### 2.3 Program affiliation and staff training

Organisations must seek affiliation with the program’s National Center in St Louis, Missouri, in order to deliver the Parents as Teachers program. Affiliates must employ trained and certified parent educators to deliver the program. Affiliates are required to establish an advisory committee that meets regularly, and provide supervision, mentoring and leadership for Parent Educators. They are required to collect administrative data for the purposes of evaluation and continuous quality improvement.

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1 At the end of the three-year program, the ACT Parent advisor usually provides these notes to the parents.
Parent educators trained to deliver the PAT program (called parent advisors in the ACT) are required to undertake Foundational and Model implementation training specified by the Parents as Teachers National Center (or its affiliates). Parent advisors are also required to undertake relevant professional learning based on an annual assessment of their competencies in five core areas, reflected in a professional growth plan. They are expected to undertake a specified number of hours of professional learning each year aligned with their professional growth plan (e.g., 20 hours per year during the first year of certification). Parent educators must renew their certification with the National Office annually.

The minimum qualification specified for parent educators is Year 12 completion and two years of supervised work experience with young children and/or parents (Parents as Teachers National Center 2012: 6). In the ACT, parent advisors delivering the program have post-school qualifications in either childcare, early childhood education, school education, maternal and child health nursing or social work.

2.4 Program effectiveness

An independent evaluation of the Parents as Teachers program in the USA found positive outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in terms of fewer child injuries, increased rates of immunisation, improved language and literacy development and social behaviour, as well as improved parent attitudes and happiness in caring for the child (Wagner et al. 2001). A long-term analysis of data on program outcomes in Missouri, USA found that parents of children on the program were more likely to take an active role in their child’s education, both through practising literacy – promoting behaviours at home and in initiating meetings with their child’s teacher. It also found that children from high-poverty backgrounds who experienced the program at an intense level out-performed children of a similar background on a Year 3 school achievement test (Pfannenstiel and Zigler 2007).

Research conducted by Drotar and others (2008) showed that the Born to Learn® curriculum, which underpins the Parents As Teachers program, had beneficial effects on task competence at 36 months of age. They linked this outcome to the program’s focus on improving the ability of parents to provide a home learning environment designed to enhance their child’s spontaneous problem-solving and persistence on novel tasks. Zigler and others (2008) concluded that the benefits accruing from a 5 year intervention – 3 years of Parents As Teachers and 2 years of educational preschool – can reduce but not eliminate the achievement gap between children growing up in impoverished homes and their more advantaged peers.

2.5 Summary

As a home-based educational program, the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program adheres to recognised good practice principles for the delivery of parent education to the families of vulnerable young children. The program provides an extensive curriculum that can be delivered by trained professionals to parents at home on a regular basis during the first three years of a child’s life. The program’s delivery is structured around regular sessions of approximately one hour, and the program’s resources can be customised to meet the needs of clients and their children. The program aims to empower parents by enhancing their knowledge and skills in regard to parenting. The individualised nature of the program enables the parent and parent advisor to prioritise and address
the most pressing issues in their own particular circumstances. Under the program’s philosophy the parent’s unique knowledge of their own child is respected, and he or she works in partnership with the parent adviser towards achieving the program outcomes.

North American research indicates that when disadvantage families participate in the *Parents as Teachers (PAT)* program, there are positive outcomes for children in terms of fewer child injuries, increased rates of immunisation, improved language and literacy development and social behaviour, as well as improved parent attitudes and happiness in caring for the child. Long-term educational benefits for disadvantaged children have also been reported, particularly among children who experience the program at an intense level. These outcomes are attributed to the program’s focus on improving the ability of parents to provide a home learning environment designed to enhance their child’s spontaneous problem solving and persistence on novel tasks.
3 The Parents as Teachers Program in the ACT

The Office of Childcare within the ACT Department of Education and Community Services began operating the Parents as Teachers program in 2001 with one full-time parent educator. The budget to provide the Parents as Teachers program to 65 families with children aged up to 36 months was $61,000 per year. In 2007, the program came under the Early Intervention and Prevention Service of the Department of Housing and Community Services and was based in the Child and Family Centres located at Tuggeranong and Gungahlin. The program is now delivered from the Child and Family Centres at Tuggeranong, Gungahlin and West Belconnen.

Originally, the Parents as Teachers program was provided on the basis of universal access and attracted families from very diverse backgrounds. More recently, it has been provided to families with young children regarded as being vulnerable. A vulnerable young child is a child whose parent(s) have one or more of the following characteristics: has been reported to Child Protection authorities; is living in assisted (crisis) accommodation; has experienced teenage parenthood; has a history of substance or alcohol abuse; is unemployed; is socially or geographically isolated; suffers from a mental illness; has experienced family violence; or has a low level of formal educational attainment.

Since its incorporation into the Early Intervention and Prevention Service, the Parents as Teachers program has become integrated with other services provided by the Child and Family Centres including Maternal and Child Health Clinics as well as Care and Protection. The program is delivered in a non-judgemental way ensuring that the focus is on the child rather than the parent. Parents are encouraged to focus on their child’s development and to engage with other educational and welfare services such as community nurses, playgroups, childcare, and preschools, as appropriate.

In this section, we present the findings from an analysis of previous research and data collected in respect of the delivery of the Parents as Teachers Program in the ACT, since it commenced a decade ago.

3.1 Evaluation Report April 2001 – August 2002

The ACT Parents as Teachers Program Evaluation Report profiled the parents involved in the program and presented the findings from a survey of participants in the Parents as Teachers program. In 2001, 65 per cent of the families in the Parents as Teachers program were classified as having one or more of the following risk factors: being a single parent, being a teenage mother, having older children with disabilities, parent on the methadone program, parent involved in the corrections system, or mother having postnatal depression.

Parents involved with the program for at least six months (n= 57) were invited to participate in the survey and 75 per cent returned completed questionnaires. Overall, parents were very happy with the program and 75 per cent rated the home visits as being very useful. Almost 96 per cent of respondents said that the program had increased their confidence as parents. All of the parents said
that it had helped them with practical parenting skills, increased their understanding of child
development, and said that they were satisfied with the information provided during the home
visits. The overwhelming majority of parents indicated that they would recommend the program to
other parents.

3.2 Parents as Teachers Report 2002

The Parents as Teachers Report 2002 was conducted by four students from the University of
Canberra who collected data via questionnaires, interviews and observations of home visits and
group meetings. There were two questionnaires: one for staff and the other for parents. All four
staff members completed the staff questionnaire (response rate of 100 per cent) and 65 parents
completed the parent benefit questionnaire (response rate of 52 per cent). Semi-structured
interviews were conducted with four parents and the researchers also attended two home visits and
two group meetings.

Data from the parent benefit survey shows that 57 per cent of the parents were in paid employment
and that only two parents had withdrawn from the program.

When asked to rank the most beneficial elements of the program, 53 parents selected
‘developmental knowledge’, 26 parents selected ‘support for depression’, 25 parents selected
‘confidence and competence’ and 18 parents selected ‘experiences/toys/activities’. Parents stated
that the advisors provided them with strategies, experiences, ideas and developmental knowledge
to help them promote linguistic and literacy concepts in daily routines. Through their interaction
with the advisors, parents had a heightened awareness of child development and were able to see
difficult behaviour as a developmental frustration.

The home visits were highly regarded and many parents commented on their appreciation of the
regular visits that made them feel less isolated and provided them with opportunities to discuss their
concerns. Data from the staff survey showed that staff made a total of 14 referrals to various
specialists and agencies including: parent groups, playgroups, nutritionist, eye specialist, community
nurses, ACT Behavioural Guidance and childcare providers.

3.3 Exit surveys 2003 – 2011

When their children turn three, the Parents as Teachers program home visits end and parents are
asked to complete an ‘exit survey’. The information gathered in these surveys provides an insight
into how the parents value the program and the benefits that they believe that they and their
children have gained from being involved.

In this section we analyse the responses of 76 exit surveys completed by parents between 2003 and
2010. In 19 cases, we could not determine the year the questionnaire was completed, as shown in
Table 1.

The questionnaires included both forced-choice questions and open-ended questions giving parents
the opportunity to share their general impressions of the program. Parents were asked about their
thoughts on the Parents as Teachers program; about the advisor who conducted the home visits;
about the benefits of the home visits; about their knowledge and use of other services; and whether
or not they would recommend the Parents as Teachers program to other parents.
Table 1  Exit surveys by year completed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>n=</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not able to determine</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Child-focused knowledge and skills

When parents were asked about the most important skills or abilities that should be possessed by Parent advisors conducting the home visits, 38 per cent ranked ‘knowledge of child development’ as being the most important and 30 per cent ranked ‘experience working with children’. Twenty per cent ranked ‘communication skills’ as being the most important; one per cent ranked ‘knowledge of support services’; and 11 per cent were unable to choose between the four options (Table 2).

The parents’ responses, shown in Table 2, indicate that parents consider that the most important skill that a Parent advisor should have is knowledge of child development and/or experience working with children. This suggests that the child-focused elements of the Parent advisor’s role are highly most highly by over two-thirds of the program clients.

Table 2  Valued skills and abilities of parent advisors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill/ability</th>
<th>% ranking this as most important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of child development</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of support services</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience working with children</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All important, unable to choose</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Toys, activities and books

During each of the home visit sessions, the Parents as Teachers advisor engages the child and parent in activities considered appropriate for the child’s age/ stage of development. Story books and toys are also shared with the family. Many of the activities involve making toys from everyday household items so that parents without high incomes can afford to provide their children with fun learning experiences. The overwhelming majority of parents (96%) said that they found the toys, activities and books either very useful or useful.

Parent Handouts
As part of the program, parents are given handouts related to each session. These handouts reinforce the information given during the session. Each parent is given a folder in which to keep the handouts and thus, over time, they provide a manual of easy to read information appropriate to their child’s development. When parents were asked about how useful they found the written materials, 73 per cent selected either very useful or useful and a further 21 per cent selected either mostly useful or sometimes useful. The remaining 7 per cent of parents did not answer this question.

**Program flexibility**

Another aspect of the program that was appreciated by the parents was its flexibility. Appointments are scheduled at a mutually convenient time for the parent and the advisor. Parents can easily change their appointment times and the advisor will endeavour to reschedule the meeting as soon as possible. Therefore it is no surprise that 88 per cent of parents said that they had found the program either extremely flexible or very flexible. Levels of overall satisfaction were also high with 95 per cent of parents being either extremely or very satisfied with the program.

**Parenting skills, confidence and support**

Parents were also asked to reflect on what they had gained from participating in the program. Almost half the parents (37) mentioned that the program had given them more confidence in their ability to parent. For example, several mentioned having more “confidence as a parent” and others mentioned having “confidence in myself”. Twelve parents said that the program had provided much needed support. For example, the program “provided support when my networks were reduced” for one parent. Another parent said that “the support and encouragement were great”. Six parents mentioned that they had gained reassurance that they were being a good parent. For example, one parent said that they had gained “reassurance that my parenting is effective and that my child’s development is on track”. Another parent said that they gained “the reassurance in knowing that what I am doing is right”.

**Extend participation in PAT Program**

Parents were given the opportunity to share their thoughts on how to improve the program. Many parents left this section blank and of those who did offer some advice, 15 parents said that they really couldn’t think of any way that the program could be improved. For example, one parent said, “I think I had an excellent experience with PAT. I have no suggestions for improvement as a result”. Some parents (12) suggested that the program should be expanded to allow more parents with the opportunity to participate. For example, one parent wanted the program expanded to “allow every parent with a first child to participate” and another parent suggested that they should “have more parent advisors to have more spaces available”. Six parents asked that the program be extended to include children up to school age or beyond. Some parents thought that the program should be advertised more widely. For example, one parent said, “advertise more- it’s a great program- not many know it exists”.

The final question asked parents if they would recommend the *Parents as Teachers* program; all of the parents selected yes and when probed for their reasons why, 16 parents said that they would definitely recommend it to all first time parents. For example, one parent said “I could see the program being very important to new first time mums, particularly stay at home mum”. Another 13 parents said that they would recommend the program because it was supportive. For example, one parent said the program provided “invaluable support and guidance”. Eight parents mentioned that
the program was helpful. For example one parent noted that it was “very good for helping with post-natal depression” and another said that it was “helpful to get independent advice”.

3.4 Summary

Program evaluations and administrative data from exit surveys of participants over the past seven years indicate that the Parents as Teachers (PAT) Program in the ACT is highly valued by parents for its key program elements, particularly the program’s focus on developing the skills and confidence of parents in regard to their child’s development. Key program features such as the child-focused nature of the program, its flexibility, and its activity-based curriculum were all nominated as strengths by respondents to exit surveys conducted since 2003. The exit surveys also indicate a consistently high level of satisfaction with the program among parents over the past decade. The majority of program participants recommend that the Program should be offered more widely so that more new parents have the opportunity to participate.
4 The *Parents as Teachers* program for vulnerable young children

The analysis of administrative data presented in the preceding section indicates that the *Parents as Teachers* program in the ACT is highly valued by program participants. Key program features such as the child-focused nature of the program, its flexibility and its activity-based curriculum are all nominated as strengths by respondents to the exit surveys conducted since 2003. In this section, we present our analysis of the data collected specifically for this study, primarily from interviews with parents of vulnerable young children who are currently participating in, or have recently exited from the Parents as Teachers program, as delivered by the Early Intervention and Prevention Service through the Child and Family Centres in the ACT.

While the parents of vulnerable young children are likely to have been included in previous studies, they are not identifiable as a sub-group in any previous research nor identified in the administrative data from the exit surveys. In order to make vulnerable children and their families the primary focus of this study, the research team accompanied the parent advisor to observe home visits and conducted interviews with PAT program clients who are the parents/carers of vulnerable young children. Program personnel and parent advisors were also interviewed by the researchers. From the data collected, we conducted a thematic analysis to identify major issues, guided by the research questions for the study:

1. What factors facilitate the participation of parents/carers of vulnerable young children in the PAT program as delivered through the Child and Family Centre network in the ACT?
2. What elements of the PAT program and its delivery are valued most by parents and carers of vulnerable young children?
3. What features of the program or its delivery appear critical to ensuring the ongoing engagement of vulnerable young children and their families in this early intervention initiative?

The findings are presented below.

4.1 Reaching the ‘hard-to-reach’

As discussed in Section 1, the children most vulnerable to developmental delay are often in families where, for a range of reasons, their parents or carers are unable or unwilling to engage in parenting education programs. Clients for the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program in the ACT are selected on a basis that aims to maximise the engagement of ‘hard-to-reach’ families. Access to the program is limited to families which meet criteria of disadvantage. In the ACT, the Parents as Teachers program is targeted to clients classified as disadvantaged in terms of having one or more of the following characteristics: has been reported to Child Protection authorities; is living in assisted (crisis) accommodation; has experienced teenage parenthood; has a history of substance or alcohol abuse;  

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A description of the method and approach used to observe a home visit is provided in Appendix B.
is unemployed; suffers from a mental illness; has experienced family violence; is socially or geographically isolated; or has a low level of formal educational attainment.

Parent advisors reported that many clients are referred to the program from services such as Child Protection, Maternal and Child Health professionals, or Therapy ACT as well as other programs offered by Child and Family Centres. The program clients all met the criteria of disadvantage in different ways. Some of the parents were dealing with their own or their partners’ mental health issues, others were recent migrants trying to overcome the difficulties of learning English, many of the parents were socially isolated, with the parent advisors being their only link to the outside world. Many of the children had been diagnosed as being developmentally delayed. The majority of clients on the program lived in challenging circumstances, met more than one criteria of disadvantage and had complex needs.

**Complexity and diversions**

The researchers interviewed five parent advisors and two policy personnel to gain an understanding of the Program, its aims, its costs and its benefits. The parent advisors had completed the *Parent as Teachers* training course and were able to integrate this training and knowledge with their previous experiences as social workers, nurses or early childhood educators. The training requires the completion of a five day course encompassing all aspects of the *Born to Learn* curriculum. Parent advisors are also trained on how to use the *Parents as Teachers* manuals so that they can tailor the program to the needs of each client.

Parent advisors said that the program prepared them well to deliver parent education to the parents of vulnerable children. As Regina remarked ‘*The training gives you the skills to deliver the information in a way that parents will accept and not get annoyed with you*.’ However a major challenge was actually delivering the parent education content of the program to clients who are distracted by other issues. Jean noted that ‘*vulnerable families cannot focus on child development when the parents have so many other issues - for example having to move house frequently*.’ Dorothy mentioned that sometimes she would ‘*turn up ready to deliver the session but the parent wanted to talk about other issues*,’ which she would have to deal with before delivering the session.

In some cases, the program needs to be suspended:

‘*some mums find it hard to focus on PAT, particularly when they need to talk about other issues like accommodation needs. They need to fix the basics first so sometimes we have to suspend the program till they get sorted. They can resume later and often stay engaged with the program. We try not to suspend but when they are in that degree of crisis it’s hard to focus on the program*’ (Dorothy, parent advisor)

The presence of additional people such as family members or friends, during scheduled sessions was noted by several parent advisors and also observed by the researchers on home visits. The impact of visitors can be disruptive. In the home visits observed by the researchers, the session continued and the visitor became interested and somewhat engaged with the session. However one parent advisor reported the arrival of visitors as a common distraction: ‘*. . . they get visitors coming in and then lose focus on the session*’ (Hannah, parent advisor).

As the Program is currently restricted to disadvantaged families, the majority of the clients are in need of support from several agencies. Acknowledging the complexity of their clients’ lives, the parent advisors recognised the importance of being flexible in their approach. Nevertheless
delivering the program to clients with complex needs on a regular basis was mentioned by all parent advisors as a professional challenge. The parent advisors said that they coped with the challenges of having case loads of clients with complex needs through peer mentoring and support from their supervisors.

**Bridging strategies strained**

The parent advisors implement many ‘bridging strategies’ to maximise the engagement of ‘hard-to-reach’ clients, such as being flexible about rescheduling and always making a reminder call before the home visit is due. However all the parent advisors commented that these bridging strategies are not always effective and sometimes sessions do not take place when scheduled, for many reasons.

Parent advisors indicated that some clients were often hard to reach because they forgot about their appointments, moved house, changed their phone numbers or were simply unreliable when it came to keeping appointments. The parent advisors acknowledged that this was usually the result of the clients having complex needs. As Dorothy observed, “vulnerable families lives are quite chaotic... they just have so much else going on”. Parent advisors also reported that some clients found it difficult to engage in the program due to their lack of confidence and/or mental health issues. Jean said that one particular mother “would refuse to open the door or answer the phone” and that other parents “cannot make regular appointments”.

The parent advisors cope with these difficulties by ‘not giving up’ and being ‘persistent and proactive’. As Jean noted, “quite often it’s hard to keep the relationship going – they need to trust you enough to change the way they think about their children”. However most parent advisors offered an example of their persistence being rewarded:

“I thought I would never hear from her again. After 3 months I wrote her the letter to finish the program, and still no contact. Then I rang her partner and he gave me her new mobile number so I rang her and she is back in now” (Dorothy, parent advisor)

**4.2 Most valued aspects of the program**

Although the parents of vulnerable children were of varying ages and in different circumstances, their views of the program’s benefits were quite similar. The most common themes from the interview transcripts were that the program was effective in addressing feelings of isolation; improving their confidence and skills in parenting; and helping them to access other services.

**Addressing social isolation**

The home visits were a very highly valued aspect of the program, from the perspective of all interviewees, reinforcing the importance of home visits as a bridging strategy for ‘hard-to-reach’ clients. Lack of transport was often cited as a barrier to participation that the families of vulnerable children are more likely to face. Several of the parents said it was difficult to attend the child and family centres and other services due to their inability to access transport. For Angela, the home visits provided “the reassurance – someone coming to your home. I had no transport and my baby was sick.” Two mothers relied on their partners to drive them everywhere which meant they had to fit everything around their partner’s work commitments [Glenys & Dimity, parents]
A repeated theme in all the interviews with parents was that home visits were a particularly important means of addressing the extreme social isolation experienced by new parents, particularly people with mental health issues. Most parents talked about the sense of isolation they experienced when they became parents. Many had no family or friends living close by and some mentioned that their only real friend was their parent advisor. The parent advisor had become their link to the outside world, providing a range of services apart from the home visits, child development and parenting advice. For example:

“[Parent advisor] saved me from a very dark place. I didn’t know anyone in Canberra- [Parent advisor] is the only one that I know” (Jim, parent)

“I was very isolated when I had my child. I didn’t know many people...it was important to have an adult to talk to and to be there when I needed someone to talk to” (Sally, parent).

“I don’t have any family here – no long term friendships and living out in the country is quite isolating at times. There are no social networks close by. [Parent advisor] has become part of that for me.” (Kim, parent).

“I don’t interact a lot with other families – the boys do a few classes – dancing and swimming. I don’t talk to many people so [Parent advisor] helped me with that.” Beth

**Improved parenting skills and confidence**

The primary focus of the Parents as Teachers (PAT) Program on parenting skills was highly valued by clients. While many interviewees alluded to other issues in their lives, they emphasized the importance and value of a program that focused on their child. While mental health issues and post-natal depression were often mentioned by parents, they said that the child-focused program had been of great benefit to them. One parent spoke of his wife’s suicide nine months after the birth of their child, reflecting that in the days following the child’s birth his wife “…was not responding to anyone, even the child…” This parent regrets that he was only referred to the program when he became a single parent and not earlier, “we needed the program then cause...mental health focus on the drugs and mum but not on the whole family and what is best for the family” (Colin, parent).

Two mothers volunteered information about mental health issues in praise of the program:

“I had PND so it really helped me” (Miranda, parent)

“I had post-traumatic stress – I needed help to bring the focus back on child” (Tegan, parent)

When we asked parents about the benefits they received from being involved in the program, all said that they felt more confident in their parenting. For example, Colin told us that the program “helps me to reflect on my parenting skills. So [child] has a happier parent.”

Others also mentioned how the parent advisor had helped them to become more confident parents. For example, Sally said that the “[Parent advisor] helped me to sort out what I wanted – thinking things through to see what was best . . . There is no manual and things just happen so you need to work out what is best for you.”
Some parents mentioned the advice that they had received with behaviour issues such as tantrums. For example, Jessie said “If I need help [Parent advisor] gives me ideas to help with the problem like when [child] had tantrums”.

Tegan felt that she benefitted from the program because her parent advisor was “someone to talk to... who is helpful to me. I need support with [child]...The advice is helpful – sometimes I am just not sure if I am doing the right things”.

For other parents, the Program had helped them develop more confidence in themselves as parents. For example, Simone “learnt to interact with the kids – I learnt a lot . . . the Program gave me confidence to get help for the boys.”

“[Parent advisor] teaches me how to teach him – he is so much better now – I have learnt ways to calm him down . . . I get less angry with him now” (Sandra, parent).

A parent who experienced social anxiety spoke of the effects that her isolation had had on her children:

“When I had the boys, I stayed home a lot and the boys didn’t learn to socialize. [Parent advisor] helped me tackle the problem of needing to help socialize the boys” (Simone, parent).

Support in accessing other services

Many parents emphasised the help that they received from the parent advisor in accessing other services that they needed, in areas such as childcare, public housing, mental health services and counselling. For example, Miranda mentioned that her parent advisor “… wrote a letter of support for me to get a public housing place”.

Jacqui appreciated her parent advisor’s help in accessing medical services, “with other things like when he needed to get immunized. I hadn’t been able to take him cause I am terrified of needles myself.”

Getting help with childcare was often mentioned. For example, “[Parent advisor] helped with strategies for dealing with childcare” (Colin, parent); “[Parent advisor] helped me to work out how to find the right childcare for us” (Sally, parent); and “[Parent advisor] has helped us get into other groups like learn, giggle, grow but I don’t like groups. She also helped us with the childcare and arranged fee relief” (Jim, parent).

One of the parents with a culturally and linguistically diverse background was confident that “[Parent advisor] will find a course for me – she helps me with English classes.” (Dimity, parent).

4.3 Key features for engaging the parents of vulnerable young children

From this study, several features of the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program and the way it is delivered in the ACT emerge as important in terms of engaging parents of vulnerable young children in parent education. The features cited most often by parent participants as important were: home visits; the relationship of trust with parent advisor; and the support in accessing other services.
Home visits

All parents expressed their appreciation of the home visits, and several indicated that they would not have participated if the parent advisor did not come to their home. These parents said they were not confident enough to seek out services and engage in the social interactions that joining groups required. Over the course of the program some had managed to overcome their reluctance and had attended playgroup sessions held at the Child and Family Centre, others had enrolled their children in childcare to help them socialize with other children and some had enrolled their children in classes (dancing, swimming, therapy sessions). This quote from Beth sums up what several parents told us “I would not have kept on the program if it were not home visits. I am not a social person – this way I do not have to deal with other people”.

Home visits were also valued by parent advisors as a ‘window’ onto the other issues in the clients’ lives that were likely to have an influence on the child’s development, such as frequent house moves or changes of partner. This contextual knowledge enables the parent advisor to offer more informed advice about issues related to the child’s development or behaviour that might be of concern. For example, if the child’s behaviour is nominated as an issue of concern by a parent who has moved house three times in the past four months, the parent advisor can frame her advice around the unsettling effects of moving house and offer strategies to assist with those transitions. Such contextual knowledge would be less readily available if the parent education sessions were delivered outside of the home.

While home visits are an important bridging strategy in engaging ‘hard-to-reach’ clients, they also enhance the delivery of the parent education curriculum. From observing the child in a family context, the parent advisor has a much richer source of data to inform her advice on parenting issues and to customise the program delivery to suit the client’s needs.

Relationship of trust with parent advisor

Several of the parents interviewed for our study spoke about the closeness of their relationship with their parent advisor and of their ability to trust their parent advisor to always be there for them, to not judge them and to give them support when they needed it. One parent remarked that she had been a client of the program in another jurisdiction where the parent advisor “just gave me heaps of hand-outs”. In contrast, she now trusted her current parent advisor and respected her advice. Many parents emphasised that they valued the fact that their parent advisor was not “judgmental” about their parenting skills. One interviewee said it had taken several visits before she felt she could trust the parent advisor.

Parents commented frequently on the flexibility and the non-judgmental attitude of their parent advisor.

“[Parent advisor] is flexible. I forget things and [Parent advisor] rings up the day before to remind me. She isn’t judgmental.” (Simone, parent).

Some parents felt that they were being judged by others, especially other parents. Angela commented that “Being a young mum I felt like I was being judged all the time but [Parent advisor] didn’t judge me.” (Angela, parent).
“[Parent advisor] is really flexible with appointments . . . [Parent advisor] doesn’t mind the mess – she has seen my place like this. She just comes and sits on the floor.” (Sally, parent)

Our findings are consistent with those of other researchers who observed that ‘after working with their home visitors for extended periods, some mothers who had troubled social support histories developed strong bonds with their home visitors. Though these relationships were difficult at first after some time it appeared home visitors were providing positive social support that was not otherwise present in mothers’ lives’ (Brookes-Gunn et al. 2006:33).

The skill with which the parent advisor builds a relationship of trust with the client is critical to the engagement of the parents of vulnerable young children in a parent education program. Given the barriers to engagement, and the time it takes to build trusting relationships with parents of vulnerable young children, it is important that the parent advisor is the same person, as far as practicable, throughout the three years of the program’s delivery. A factor contributing to the success of the ACT program in engaging parents of vulnerable young children could be the commitment of the staff involved in the program. The parent advisor who recruited our participants has been involved in the program since its inception in 2001 and many others have been involved in the program for several years. Evidence from the USA suggests that a high turnover in staff makes it more difficult for families to develop trusting relationships with their parent advisors and thus potentially reduces the effectiveness of the program (Wagner et al. 2003).

Parent advisors also need to be given sufficient time to prepare for home visits. It is important that the time involved in preparing the individualised parent education component of the program is acknowledged. Several parent advisors mentioned the amount of time they needed to spend preparing for the home visits to customise the sessions was not recognised. Regina mentioned that a challenge was: “Preparation – going through the curriculum and getting things ready and having the time . . . In the workplace it is difficult to find time – other people interrupt you not realising that you have to invest in the time”.

The importance of the relationship of trust between the parent advisor and the client must be acknowledged as a key factor in engaging parents of vulnerable young children in parent education through the Parents as Teachers (PAT) Program. While the training and professional development requirements of the program provide aim to assure the quality of parent advisors, additional professional learning for parent advisors could be provided through monitoring client feedback, peer support among parent advisors and mentoring arrangements.

**Linking program clients to other services**

As the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program is delivered by the Early Intervention and Prevention Service in the Child and Family Centre network, clients’ needs for other services can be addressed as they arise. While parent advisors noted that the need to address other issues often got in the way of the delivery of the parent education component of the program, they all acknowledged that the parent education would not be delivered unless these issues were addressed. Thus the parent advisors are equipped with the skills to link program clients to additional forms of support. This feature of the program was highly valued by the parents of vulnerable children in this study.

“Program helped me to get to POPPY [a closed playgroup for parents with mental health issues, held at the Child and Family Centre] and get out of the house and meet others. I couldn’t do that otherwise. Now that I get out I am not so isolated” (Jessie, parent)
For a vulnerable child whose parent remains engaged in the Parents as Teachers (PAT) Program for two or three years, there is evidence to suggest that the long-term impact of the program is significant, and that there are spillover benefits for siblings of the child. For example, a parent advisor described her journey with one mother who has two sons in primary school and a young daughter who was referred to the Program. Initially the mother was ‘hard-to-reach’, forgetting appointments, and refusing to answer the door and phone. However gradually over time she developed a trusting relationship with her parent advisor, who said:

“The baby was developmentally delayed. Over time we started taking the baby to physio. – I went along to the appointments too. The child is almost three now and is walking and has caught up with most of the milestones . . . One of the older children has ADHD and now both the older children participate in an art-based therapy program – I was able to link the mother with these other services” (Jean, parent advisor)

4.4 Summary

The Parents as Teachers (PAT) program in the ACT targets vulnerable young children and their families by requiring program participants to meet criteria of disadvantage. The professional training required to deliver Parents as Teachers (PAT) program equips parent advisors with the skills to deliver the program to clients with complex needs. However delivering the program to clients with complex needs remains a professional challenge for parent advisors. While many ‘bridging strategies’ to maximise the engagement of ‘hard-to-reach’ clients are employed, such as being flexible about rescheduling and always making a reminder call before the home visit is due, these strategies are not always effective and some clients remain difficult to engage. However the parent advisors report many instances where their persistence (and flexibility) has paid off. They also report that once they have gained a client’s trust, engagement in the program is more assured.

Valued aspects

Parents of vulnerable children who participated in the interviews were of varying ages and in different circumstances, however their views of the program’s benefits were quite similar, converging on three main themes: addressing feelings of isolation; improving their confidence and skills in parenting; and helping them to access other services. In discussing how the program provided these benefits, all participants emphasised the value of home visits, thus reinforcing the importance of home visits as a bridging strategy for engaging ‘hard-to-reach’ clients.

Key features

From this study, several features of the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program and the way it is delivered in the ACT emerged as important in terms of engaging parents of vulnerable young children in parent education. The features praised most often by parents were: home visits; the relationship of trust with a parent advisor; and the support provided in accessing other services.

While home visits are an important bridging strategy in engaging ‘hard-to-reach’ clients, they also enhance the delivery of the parent education curriculum. From observing the child in a family context, the parent advisor has a much richer source of data to inform her advice on parenting issues and to customise the program delivery to suit the client’s needs.
The importance of the relationship of trust between the parent advisor and the client must be acknowledged as a key factor in engaging parents of vulnerable young children in parent education through the Parents as Teachers (PAT) Program. While the training and professional development requirements of the program provide aim to assure the quality of parent advisors, additional professional learning for parent advisors could be provided through monitoring client feedback, peer support among parent advisors and mentoring arrangements.

As the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program is delivered by the Early Intervention and Prevention Service in the Child and Family Centre network, clients’ needs for other services can be addressed as they arise. While parent advisors noted that the need to address other issues often got in the way of the delivery of the parent education component of the program, they all acknowledged that the parent education would not be delivered unless these issues were addressed. Thus the parent advisors are equipped with the skills to link program clients to additional forms of support. This feature of the program was highly valued by the parents of vulnerable children in this study.
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Appendices
A.1 Interview questions

Parents

How were you introduced to the PAT program?

Why do you participate in it?

Is it easy to participate in the program?

Is there anything that you don’t like about the program?

What are the benefits for your child?

What are the benefits for you?

What would you like to see more of in the PAT program?

What would you like to see less of in the PAT program?

Any other comments?

Parent advisors

How were you introduced to the PAT program?

What is your general experience of the PAT program?

What are the challenges of delivering the program to parents of vulnerable children?

What are the benefits of the PAT program for the clients?

Are there any negative aspects of the PAT program for you and/or your clients?

What are your experiences of delivering the program to different client groups?

What would improve delivery of the program to parents of vulnerable children?

Do you have any other comments on the PAT program in general?

Policy Personnel

How were you introduced to the PAT program?

What is your general experience of the PAT program?

What are the challenges in targeting parents of vulnerable children?

What are the benefits of the PAT program for the clients?

Are there any negative aspects of the PAT program for you and/or your organisation?

What would improve delivery of the program to parents of vulnerable children?

Do you have any other comments?
A.2 Home visits

The parent advisor arranged for the researchers to accompany her on five home visits. Researcher 1 attended three home visits and Researcher 2 attended two home visits. During the home visit, the parent advisor introduced the parent(s) to the researchers and the consent forms were completed before the session began. The researcher sat on the floor and tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. Rather than take notes during the session, the researchers wrote up their observations as soon as possible after each home visit. In each case, the parents were happy to participate in this phase of the evaluation. The researchers were particularly interested in the way the parents interacted with the parent advisor. In each case, the sessions were well-received and the parents were obviously comfortable in their interactions with the parent advisor. They listened to the parent advisor and watched her ‘play’ with their child. The parent advisor provided a carefully-planned and well thought out session designed to engage both the child and the parent(s). The parents freely asked questions on a range of topics seeking advice about their child, what to expect next and how to access other services. For example, one parent mentioned that their child was not happy about going to bed and would run off when it was time to put on her pyjamas. Another parent asked for advice on how to get a bigger house from ACT Government Housing.

Throughout the session, the parent advisor talked to the child as well as to the parent(s), explaining what she was doing and why it was important. Each of the activities is designed to encourage the development of literacy and numeracy skills. For example, one activity involved the threading of large coloured wooden beads onto a large shoelace. The parent advisor asked the child to pass her a particular coloured bead to see if the child knew the names of each colour. When the child took over the threading of the beads, the parent advisor passed him a bead and asked him if he knew which colour the bead was. Even though the child seemed to know which colour each bead was, he would say that the bead was ‘blue’. The parent advisor assured the parent that he did understand the difference between the colours and suggested that perhaps with more practice he would say the different names. There was much laughter and enjoyment during the bead threading game.

The parent advisor finished each session reading a story book. Each story came alive due to the enthusiasm of the parent advisor as she acted out some parts and changed voices for each character. The child was encouraged to participate in the story and to act out some parts. For example, in the story about a visit to the zoo, the child was encouraged to become various animals. In another session, the story was about a procession of bears, one of which was performing cartwheels. The child wanted to cartwheel so her mother helped her to ‘tumble’.

Interactions between the child, parents and parent advisors were enjoyed by everyone during the home visits and advice was given freely and without any expectation that parents would accept and act on it. The parent advisor would ‘put things out there’ during the course of the conversation.