The Core of Life Program—Tasmania’s Indigenous Early Childhood Development Strategy Partnership

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Youth and Family Education Resources (YFER) established the Core of Life (COL) program to be a National unique culturally inclusive life-education program designed for youth, focusing on the realities of pregnancy, birth, infant feeding and early parenting. Interwoven throughout the program is the exploration of strategies to support the ongoing strengthening of family relationships within local communities, and in 2012, YFER embarked on a partnership with the Indigenous Early Childhood Development Strategy throughout communities in Tasmania, Australia.

Tasmania has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Australia, second only to the Northern Territory. The Tasmanian rate of births for 15-19 year olds is 27.1 births per 1000, significantly higher than the national average of 16.1. Further to that, communities in Southern Tasmania such as Derwent Valley, Brighton and Glenorchy are recording rates significantly higher than the Tasmanian average. The proportion of students who had experienced sexual intercourse has increased between 2002 and 2008 surveys of Australian secondary students. In 2002 35% of students reported having sexual intercourse with this proportion increasing to 40% in 2008. The COL program is targeted at young people at a stage when they understand the relationship between actual and possible events and may be experiencing their first sexual encounter.

COL is a targeted early intervention program aimed at youth in grades 9-10, involving both male and females and is part of a multi-faceted approach which has been integrated with local service provision, and involved other key players currently addressing teenage pregnancy in Tasmania.

COL encourages a generation of young people to challenge their ideas about the reality of PREGNANCY, BIRTH, INFANT FEEDING AND EARLY PARENTING as a step toward a brighter outlook for our young and future families.

Core of Life objectives are:

- to challenge young people’s beliefs and any romantic/unrealistic ideas of parenting and promote the notion of INFORMED CHOICE
- to provide current knowledge of risk behaviours as it relates to issues of pregnancy, birthing and parenting
- to increase young people’s knowledge of who in the community is there to support them and promote community connectedness
- to increase knowledge of the value and support available for breastfeeding
- to support and create opportunities for sharing critical cultural knowledge between generations to encourage stronger healthier parenting practices.

Teenage pregnancy concerns nationally include:

Adolescent mothers have an increased risk of:

- premature birth
- low birth weight babies
- babies who die during the first year of life.

Serious concerns about:
• poor diet
• binge drinking
• smoking and substance abuse
• depression
• lack of connection and belonging within the community.

Teenage births are common among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women compared to all
women in Australia. In 2010, the teenage birth rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women
was nearly five times the teenage birth rate for all women (ABS 2011).

• Tasmania’s teenage fertility rates are the third highest in Australia outside the NT and QLD
• while the Tasmanian teenage fertility rate dropped by 20% in 2010, it still remains high at 21.5 per
1000 of the population (ABS 2011 Birth Australia)
• the Indigenous teenage birth rate was higher than the non indigenous birth rate in all states and
territories (Average 75.7per 1000 births).

YFER entered a collaborative partnership with the Tasmanian Indigenous Early Childhood
Development (IECD) which is part of the COAG’s Closing the Gap initiative.

The IECD Project aims to:

• improve access to sexual and reproductive health services, information and support for young
Aboriginal people (To ensure Aboriginal young people have the knowledge to make informed
decisions about their sexual and reproductive health)
• improve access to, and take-up of antenatal services for young Aboriginal women (healthy
pregnancies, healthy babies, healthy community).

IECD Tasmania’s Initial partnership with YFER was for:

• delivery of COL Facilitator Training to the Aboriginal community of Tasmania –(pregnancy
support workers, Aboriginal youth and health workers and trainees, IECD midwives, youth workers
and Family Planning Tasmania educators)
• mentoring of newly trained facilitators.

Current achievements to date include:

• X 2 Core of Life Facilitator Trainings with Indigenous focus
• 36 participants represented from numerous organisations, including
  – Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre
  – No. 34 Aboriginal Health Service
  – Circular Head Aboriginal Corporation
  – Wayrapattee Child and Family Service
  – Jordan River Learning Federation
  – Family Planning Tasmania
  – Royal Hobart Hospital
  – Flinders Island
  – Population Health
- SETAC
- IECD Midwife
- Department of Education

- employed local COL Coordinator part time for 2 years.

Role of Coordinator is to recruit, train, mentor and support, facilitate community connections and partnerships, to manage data base formation and data collection:

- X1 COL training in Southern Tasmania
- 18 participants completed training and are committed to facilitate COL youth sessions
- 7 have co-facilitated with 6 more booked to do so over next two months
- 230 students have received COL education from 9 schools, including flexible learning programs.

Challenges to date and overcoming these

- capturing enthusiasm
- planning and practice!
- having youth sessions scheduled as close to COL facilitator training as possible
- explore support within community controlled Aboriginal organisations—e.g. potential role for TAC COL Coordinator as piloted with Pulse Youth Health.

Recipe for success

- COMMITMENT
- ENTHUSIASM
- SUPPORT

Photographic imagery was included in this presentation to enable participants to view the rich experiences the youth and local facilitators explore and share together in promoting healthy, strong and respectful relationships whilst aiming to support the decrease of teenage pregnancy amongst youth in Tasmania.

Further information can be viewed at www.coreoflife.org.au.