

EVALUATION OF THE SFCS 2004-2009 Program Logic

BACKGROUND

The National Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2004-2009 is the primary instrument that will be used to measure the effectiveness of the Strategy in improving outcomes for children, their families and communities. The evaluation is a crucial element in determining whether the Strategy's complex, place-based approach to early intervention in Australia works.

Pioneering work

The evaluation is particularly important as the SFCS is doing pioneering work internationally, in the area of early childhood, particularly through the Communities for Children (CfC) model. It is also informing policy through the evidence-based work of Invest to Grow (ItG).

The major elements of the Strategy are:

- The SFCS concentrates on outcomes for 0-5 year old children, their families and communities;
- The SFCS is based on the National Agenda for Early Childhood (NAEC) 4 key priority areas – i.e. healthy young families, early learning and care, supporting parents and families, and child-friendly communities;
- The SFCS incorporates a 5th priority area, which applies to CfC, i.e. services working effectively together;
- The SFCS uses a partnership model – working with Non Government Organisations (NGOs), communities, social coalition/partnership; and
- The CfC initiative employs a place-based model.

Nowhere else in the world is there a program that has invested in early childhood in this way. A number of early childhood programs in the US, UK and some states/territories in Australia have done things that are similar, but the CfC model is breaking new ground, in the innovative way it is being implemented in partnership with the community. With recent visits from influential academics in the field of early childhood, such as Professor James Heckman, Nobel Prize Laureate in Economic Sciences and Social Program Evaluation, University of Chicago and Dr Jack Shonkoff, Dean at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, the Strategy has now become the focus of international attention.

Rigorous

The SFCS evaluation is rigorous. It uses a number of separate tools to assess the impact of the Strategy on improving outcomes for children, their families and communities. These tools include a longitudinal study of children and families, the Stronger Families in Australia (SFIA) study, and the assessment of outcomes through both quantitative and qualitative studies.

Using SFIA particularly, the evaluation will examine changes at the community level for children, their families and communities in the areas of health, education and welfare.

This is the first time internationally that such rigorous evaluation has been implemented on a community level to measure the impact of a place-based intervention.

The rigor of this evaluation comes through testing for changes to the whole community, not just whether there have been changes in outcomes for the users of services provided. As shown in the literature, long-term sustainable change is more likely to follow from changes at the population level rather than at the individual level.

Real sustainable outcomes are the result of:

- Early intervention
- Communities working together – social partnership model
- Service improvement – including more coordination, service gaps reduced, improved referrals, improved outcomes for those accessing the service.

Challenges

The literature tells us that we cannot expect short-term outcomes from early childhood intervention programs. To ensure sustainability, we must maintain a long-term focus, which involves investing in the long-term and reviewing and measuring changes 5 years down the track and beyond. This is because it takes time firstly to embed the initiative into the community and achieve 'ownership' by key stakeholders. Secondly, it takes time for the effects to reach all the children in the community. International research indicates that three years from start up is the minimum timescale for significant measurable effects on child outcomes to be detected.

A major challenge for an evaluation such as this is that programs such as the SFCS operate within a political environment with finite funding periods, being subject to review. In such an environment, political priorities can change and program emphases can shift. This can render baselines for data collection meaningless as time goes on. It is therefore important to constantly reinforce and revisit the evaluation framework to ensure that it remains relevant, current and a central tool for measuring the effectiveness of the SFCS, as well as informing policy and program development.

PROGRAM LOGIC

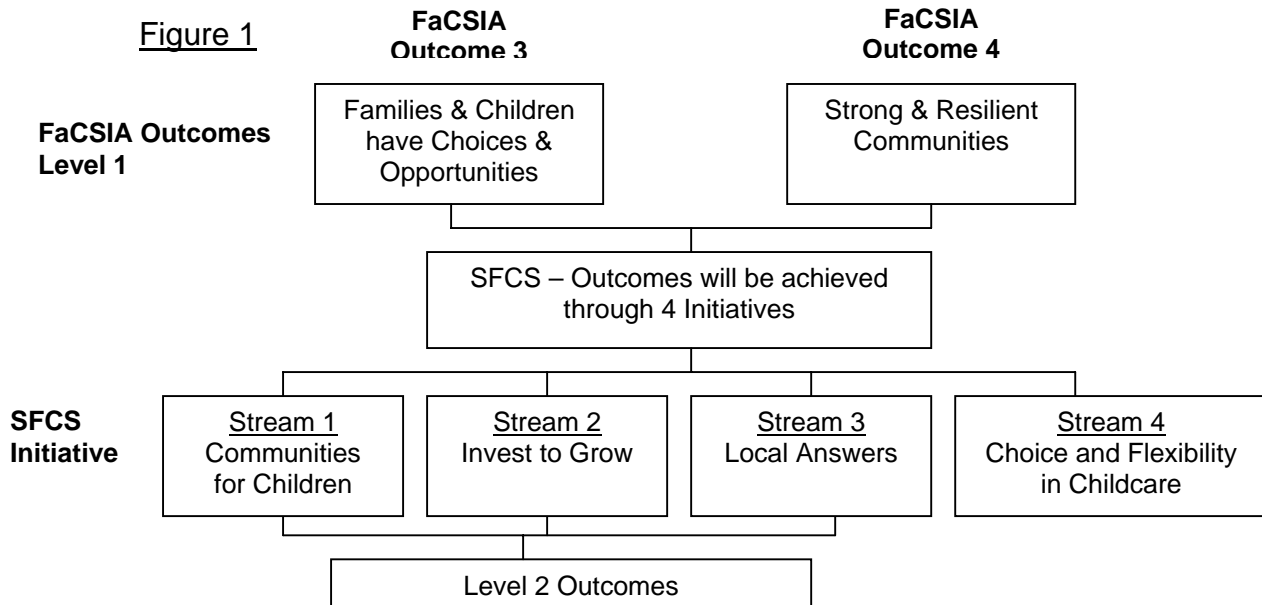
The evaluation has been designed to recognise that the impact of the SFCS will be felt over time and will not be immediate. Outcomes will be achieved through a staggered, continuous, overlapping and interactive process. According to the evidence on early childhood intervention, changes need to be implemented at a community level to have a lasting impact and this is likely to take some time to achieve.

SFCS Outcomes Framework

Outcomes for the Strategy:

The SFCS has a number of outcomes that are linked to higher-level outcomes for FaCSIA. See Figure 1.

Level 1 outcomes are FaCSIA wide. The SFCS relates directly to FaCSIA Outcome 3, Families and Children have Choices and Opportunities, and Outcome 4, Strong and Resilient Communities.



Outcomes for each SFCS Initiatives:

Level 2 outcomes are specific to each of the SFCS streams. These outcomes are based on the National Agenda for Early Childhood (NAEC) key priority areas, which are:

- Supporting families and parents
- Early learning and care
- Healthy young families
- Child friendly communities

A 5th priority area that applies specifically to CfC is:

- Family and children's services working together as a system

Level 2 outcomes were developed in consultation with experts from the early childhood and evaluation fields. These outcomes were agreed to be the most realistic outcomes that could be expected from early intervention in early childhood initiatives, such as that being implemented through the SFCS.

Level 2 outcomes have been selected on the basis of a broad, converging evidence-base about the most influential factors affecting children's life trajectories that are open to community-level intervention in early childhood.

See Figures 2, 4 and 6 below for a graphic representation of Level 2 outcomes, with each figure representing a different SFCS stream.

Criteria for measuring the SFCS success of achieving its outcomes has also been developed, in consultation with early childhood and evaluation experts. These criteria, which are linked to Level 2 outcomes for each stream, can be found in Figures 3, 5 and 7 (below).

Timeframes for achieving outcomes

Changes from the SFCS are expected to occur in order of the 4 key priority areas of the National Agenda for Early Childhood (listed above).

Considering the long-term focus of early childhood intervention and the expectation that changes will occur through a staggered, continuous, overlapping and interactive process, timeframes for achieving outcomes in the Strategy can only be indicative.

An example of this timeframe is for Communities for Children. In accordance with the SFCS outcomes framework, effective implementation of the CfC initiative should result in the following outcomes for children, parents, services and communities (see Figure 3):

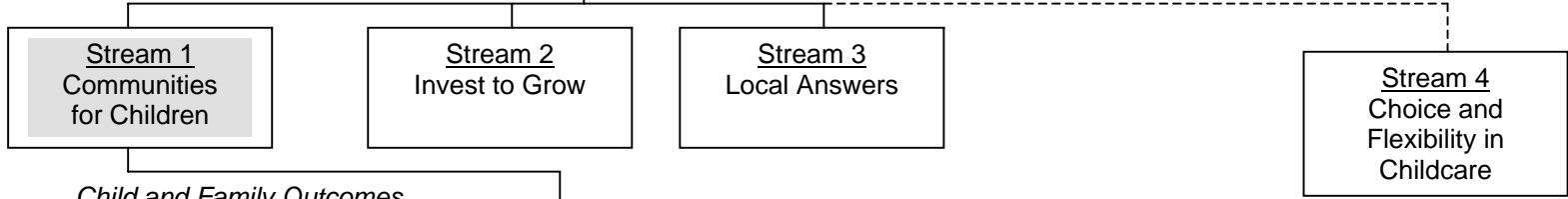
- **SHORT TERM (1-2 years): Service outcomes start to emerge**
Services and other early childhood initiatives are expected to work together more effectively. Duplication of services and gaps in service provision will begin to be identified and, where possible, addressed. We expect to see effective pathways between services or other activities forming. Families should be in a position to know where to find appropriate support services.
- **MEDIUM TERM (2-3 years): Child and family outcomes start to emerge**
As a result of improved service provision and coordination, we expect first reports of improved outcomes for children and families accessing services or other early childhood initiatives. Improved outcomes could include better parenting skills, improved diet during pregnancy and more appropriate access to services.
- **LONG TERM (3-5 years +): Community outcomes start to emerge**
Expectations are that child and family outcomes will start improving within the whole community (eg. a more trusting and safer community willing to participate in community activities), and that service delivery changes will be mainstreamed. Those people hardest to reach will be more engaged.

FaCSIA Outcome 3 Families & Children have Choices & Opportunities

FaCSIA Outcome 4 Strong & Resilient Communities

**SFCS Outcomes through 4 Initiatives
Communities for Children**

Level 2



Service Outcomes

Family and Children's Services System

Child and Family Outcomes

Healthy Young Families

Early Learning and Care

Supporting Families and Parents

Improved coordination of services and institutions

Parents supported before and after birth and in the early years

Access to early learning experiences
Early identification and support for at-risk children
Parents assisted in promoting child development

Parents supported to provide quality environments to children

Description of Approaches

(in)-Effectiveness identified

Improved pre- and postnatal health

Improved child physical health and development

Improved school readiness

Improved social and emotional functioning

Strong parent-child relationships

Improved parenting competence and style

Improved family capacity and resources

Improved family functioning

Community Outcomes

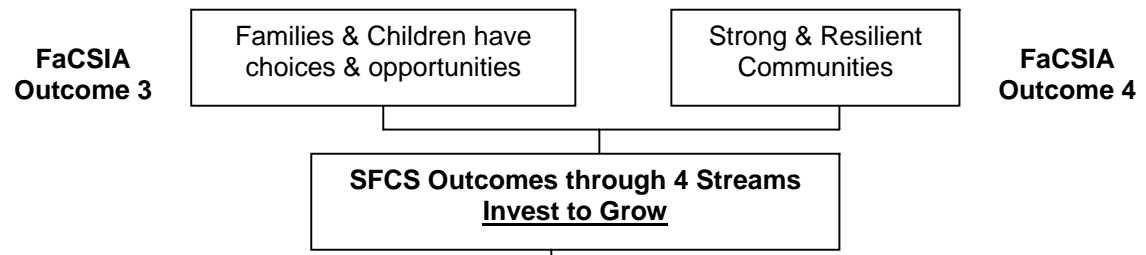
Child-friendly communities

Communities understand the importance of the early years

Communities are inclusive of all families and cultures

Improved community interest and capacity to own and respond to early childhood issues

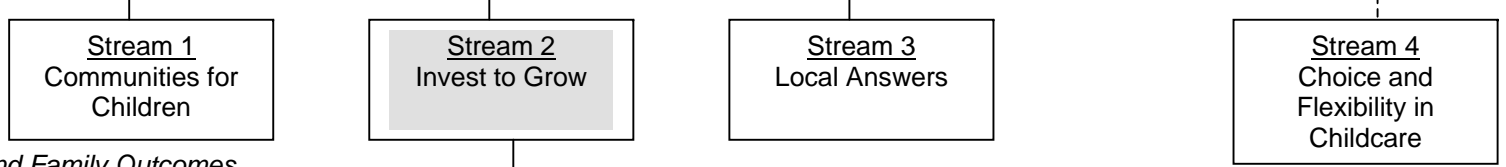
Community members, its facilities and institutions, work together to improve early childhood, development and well being issues



Invest to Grow

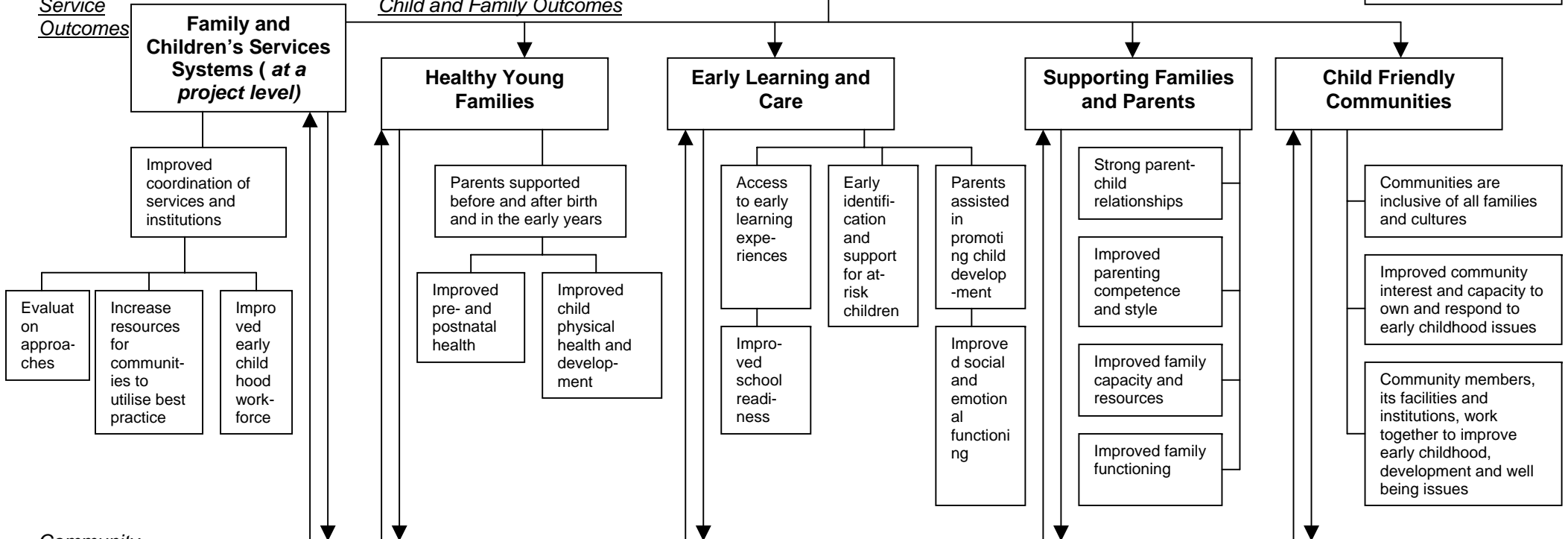
Level 2

Figure 3: Level 2 outcomes and criteria for ItG



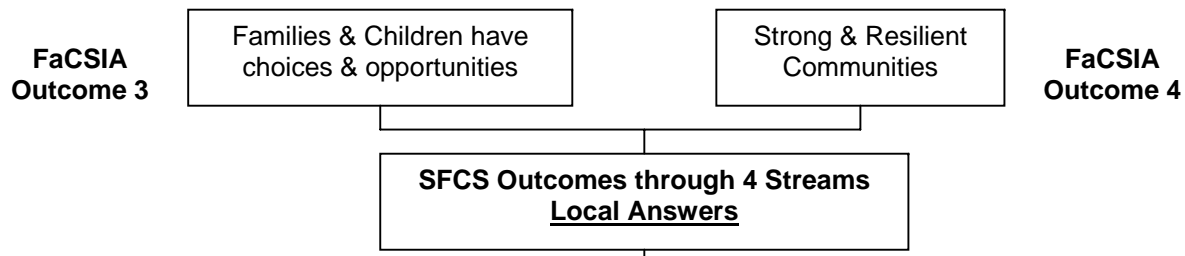
Service Outcomes

Child and Family Outcomes



Community Outcomes

Increase the Australian evidence base that documents funded models that have been assessed for their impact, costs and suitability for broader rollout



Local Answers

Level 2

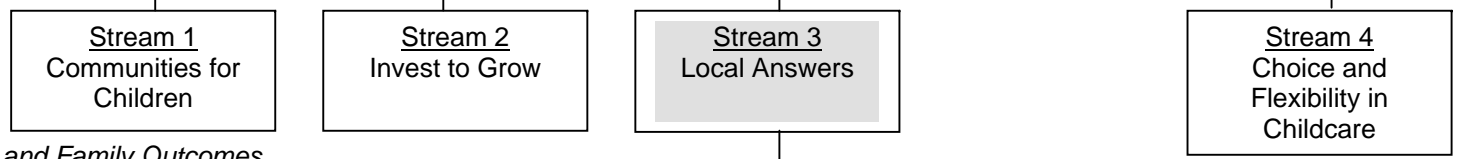


Figure 6: Level 2 outcomes and criteria for LA

