Newpin: Getting children home
Social Benefit Bond stories
Contributions

Thanks to the parents, staff and children of the UnitingCare Burnside Newpin Centres whose stories and images appear in this book. All names of the Newpin families have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Consent was obtained from the parent(s) or person(s) having parental responsibility of each of the children and young persons whose images appear in this book at the time of publication. It is impracticable for the organisation to seek consent for each individual, child or young person whose circumstances may have changed since publication of this book and whose circumstances may be unknown to the organisation at the time of future publications.

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Book design by Jake Rennie

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Foreword

by Emeritus Professor Dorothy Scott OAM, Patron of Newpin

Australia is at the crossroads of child protection policy. As you read this, approximately 40,000 children across our nation are in State care under a child protection court order. This is twice the number of children in State care a decade ago, a far greater increase than population growth would predict.

The figures are stark. In Australia in the year 2012-2013 there were 40,571 substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect, representing a 29 per cent increase in the previous two years. Furthermore, on June 30 2013, 40,549 children and young people were in out-of-home care, more than double that of a decade ago.

Children come into care because of the serious risks they face in their family environment – most commonly as a result of a combination of domestic violence, parental alcohol and other misuse, and mental illness. Many of the parents are themselves victims of abuse and neglect. But bringing a child into care is itself a serious risk. There is a high probability that children will be exposed to multiple placements, traumatising children, leaving them feeling insecure and rejected, and placing them at high risk of mental health disorders.

We have a moral imperative, greater even than any financial imperative, to do all we can to prevent children entering State care, and to maximise the potential for children who are in State care to be safely reunited with their families.

This is where Newpin fits in. It is a harbinger of hope for very fragile families. More than half of the families involved in Newpin have had at least one child under five years removed from their care. It is one of the most promising initiatives seen in the field of child welfare in the past decade. That is why I am honoured to be its patron.

Newpin is more than “a service” where parents are “clients” or “consumers”. Newpin nurtures a sense of belonging where parents can be contributors – where they can support one another. Being a contributor and being appreciated for what we can give is the lifeblood of self-respect. Newpin is an exemplar and may help shape the ethos in other parts of the service system. I commend to you this approach to working with vulnerable families. I believe it will fulfil its aspirations.
Preface

At the heart of our work is a deep commitment to create a fair and just society, inspiring people and communities through quality services, bold advocacy and influential research.

In this book, we share stories from our Newpin program. The perspectives offered show the range of people who inspire hope and give of themselves so that children in foster care can be safely restored to their families. There is no more important work than this. We all want to support families that provide happy and nurturing environments and enable children to be safe and cherished at home.

The Newpin Social Benefit Bond (SBB) is the first of its kind in Australia. Through this innovative model, the NSW Government, private investors, and the staff and Board of UnitingCare NSW, ACT have come together to support mothers and fathers to deal with their own trauma and build the skills and confidence needed to make profound changes so their children can return home or be prevented from entering care. In this book you will be amazed at the courage of the parents who shared their stories with us and have committed themselves to make those essential changes with the support of Newpin staff. I hope you will also be inspired by the staff and carers who reveal how they work side by side with parents and children so that the dream of a child coming home, and being safe and secure, comes true. I’m sure you will enjoy the tales of how the SBB actually works by reading the stories of those who have invested to realise change and were part of the collective of Government, financiers, advisers and UnitingCare staff who pulled this complex but invaluable ‘deal’ together. For us, the SBB means we can expand the Newpin program so it can work with more families and children in need. That is the ultimate reward.

The photographs contained in this book illustrate the joy and the hard work of parents, staff and children engaged in the Newpin SBB pilot. Many capture the attachment between the parent and child which is recreated and built up one day at a time so that children can come home from care. Relationships are the essence of Newpin. To all those who are part of an ever-widening set of relationships, we offer our deepest thanks.

Claerwen Little
Director, UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families
Introduction

Newpin (New Parent and Infant Network) is a child protection and family restoration/reunification program operated by UnitingCare Burnside, a service stream of UnitingCare NSW.ACT.

The successful introduction of Newpin to Australia in 1998 and the program’s ability to adapt and embrace change, without losing the core components and core values that underpin the Newpin philosophy, have been remarkable. This has only been possible because the fundamental principles, upon which Newpin was originally based, have continued to be key in working with parents whose early childhood experience was one of trauma and abuse.

The past three decades have seen a honing of our comprehension of attachment theory and an unprecedented advance in our understanding of brain development. As a professional who has been involved with Newpin for much of its existence, I find this very exciting. Our developing appreciation of neuroscience has provided scientific proof that long-term and two-generational (working with a parent and child concurrently) programs, which are relationship based and trauma informed, can facilitate positive changes for adults who are impacted by childhood abuse.

It is extraordinary to think that a program that started life on the second floor of an old house in the backstreets of South London would, nearly 30 years later, become Australia’s first Social Benefit Bond (SBB) pilot.

Liz Sanders
Operations and Practice Manager, Newpin

About Newpin

Newpin is an intensive child protection and parent education program that works therapeutically with families under stress to break the cycle of destructive family behaviours and enhance parent-child relationships.

Originating in the United Kingdom in the early 1980s, the Newpin model was developed in response to the needs of new parents experiencing issues such as isolation, mental illness, family violence, social disadvantage, low self-esteem and for those who were at risk of physically or emotionally harming their child or children. UnitingCare Burnside (Burnside) obtained the Newpin licence for Australia from National Newpin UK and the first Australian centre, at Bidwill in Sydney’s outer western suburbs, opened in April 1998. Burnside has since refined the Newpin UK model, based on the experience of the Australian operations. Newpin now operates several sites across Australia.

The Newpin program specialises in the development of emotional maturity and wellbeing and promotes the skills that parents need to manage their practical and emotional challenges. The welfare of children is central to Newpin practice and centres provide a secure emotional and physical place for children to explore, play, socialise and learn.

Key components of the Newpin model:

- The focus is on both the parent and the child
- It supports an individual’s emotional development, providing the essential foundation for learning and change for adults who have experienced childhood trauma and/or abuse
- It addresses issues of child safety and well-being during the parent’s learning, healing and personal development process
- It is underpinned by trauma-informed practice
- It is a long-term program, with parents attending twice a week over an 18-month period, providing them with the opportunity to integrate their learning into all aspects of their lives
- The program integrates Newpin’s five core values of support, equality, empathy, respect and self-determination, into all of the work, providing a shared language for families and staff.

In July 2013 the UnitingCare Burnside Newpin program in New South Wales (NSW) became Australia’s first SBB pilot. The Newpin model was chosen because of its proven ability to support the successful restoration of children from the foster care system back to their birth families.
The introduction of the Newpin SBB has brought a number of changes to the original Newpin program, in particular, the way the program reports on its work, the way it collects data and the assessment tools that it uses with families. These have not only impacted on the nature of the work but also on the quality. The program is now more able than ever to identify individual goals, put appropriate strategies in place and to demonstrate the changes that parents are making.

Newpin has always engaged therapeutically with parents who have experienced substantial trauma and abuse in their own childhoods. The fact that the program can now do this in a more planned and systematic manner (see Table 1 – page 11) and that it can produce evidence supporting the work is a tremendous bonus.

This new ‘Restoration’ model, which has developed as a result of the SBB, means that an increasing number of NSW children will be able to grow up with their birth families within a safe and nurturing home.

This book tells some of the stories of those people involved in the first 18 months of the Newpin SBB Restoration Program and bears witness to their courage.

A big thank you to all of the contributors, whose accounts and insights illuminate the pages of this book. In particular, a special mention goes out to the Newpin staff for their hard work, dedication and expertise, and to all the families who work tirelessly to overcome their challenges to ensure that their children have the best possible start in life.

Also a big thank you to the UnitingCare NSW.ACT Board, formerly the UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families Board, and our corporate donors who have supported and believed in Newpin as a transformative force over two decades.

Liz Sanders
Operations and Practice Manager, Newpin

Table 1
An overview of the core elements of the Newpin process

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<tr>
<th>Core Elements</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Referral</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The parent is referred to Newpin by a Community Services caseworker or an external professional worker.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Initial Visit</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Newpin Coordinator and Family Worker see the family at home for the initial visit. The Newpin approach is outlined during this time and the Newpin staff establish, in conjunction with the parent(s), if the family will benefit from participating in the Newpin program.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Centre Visit</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Newpin Coordinator or Family Worker arranges for the primary parent and their children to attend the Newpin centre for the first time. Following a successful engagement the family will attend the centre on a minimum of two days a week.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Case Meeting</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Once the primary parent has attended the centre for the first time the Coordinator will have a meeting with the local Community Service Centre (CSC) caseworker, the parent(s), relevant family members, significant others, relevant government and non-government agencies and where relevant the non-government organisation (NGO) Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) provider to discuss the proposed service intervention. Further case meetings will be called six monthly or as appropriate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Program Completion</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Six months prior to expected completion of the program Newpin staff work with the family to develop a transition plan. Families are considered to have completed Newpin once they have met their goals. Information regarding readiness to leave is gathered via ongoing assessments, observations and participation in the Personal Development Program and Therapeutic Support Groups.</td>
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**Assessments and Reviews**

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<tr>
<th>North Carolina Family Assessment Scale (NCFAS) is completed when a member first joins Newpin and then at six monthly intervals.</th>
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**Therapeutic Support Group (TSG)**

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<tr>
<th>When the parent and the children are settled into the program, the parent joins the weekly TSG.</th>
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**Personal Development Program (PDP)**

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<tr>
<th>When ready the parent joins the weekly PDP. When parents are attending group sessions children are looked after in the Playroom.</th>
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**Home Visits**

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<tr>
<th>Home visits to both parents (where applicable) are carried out during completion of each NCFAS, as well as prior and post reunification of each child and prior to closure.</th>
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**Partners’ Parenting Groups**

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<tr>
<th>Once the primary parent has attached to the program their partner joins the PDP and TSG one evening a week.</th>
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**Therapeutic Play**

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<tr>
<th>Formal and informal time spent with parents and children developing healthy attachments through therapeutic play.</th>
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Getting children home: A Director’s story

There are compelling reasons to seek an innovative solution to improve the OOHC system’s capacity to restore children in care to their birth parents that has outcomes that are amenable to measurement, that is good for children and families, good for the Government’s bottom line, and good for a new type of social investor.

The aims of the first SBB pilot in Australia were to:

- Trial a new approach to financing social care
- Raise private capital for intensive family support or individual support programs
- Deliver good outcomes resulting in savings for Government
- Use a portion of Government future savings to repay the ‘loan’ principal to the selected NGOs
- Provide a rate of return to social investors when the SBB pilot achieved agreed social outcomes.

At the time of the proposed SBB pilot, UnitingCare Burnside had been operating and financially supporting the Newpin program, a successful, evidence-based and durable model originally developed in the United Kingdom, for over a decade in four centres in Western Sydney.

Newpin was originally developed in response to the needs of mothers experiencing issues such as isolation, mental illness, family violence, social disadvantage, drug and alcohol abuse, low self-esteem, and the risk of physical or emotional harm to children.

I undertook a Churchill Fellowship to study the innovative Newpin program in the United Kingdom in 1997 to evaluate whether the Newpin approach to child protection would be suitable for the Australian context. My findings were positive.

UnitingCare Burnside obtained the licence to operate Newpin in Australia and the first Newpin opened in Australia in 1998 and three more opened over the next 10 years, including a Newpin for fathers. In 2015 Newpin has expanded to several centres across Australia as well as delivering a prison program for incarcerated fathers – Newpin Inside.

Newpin’s original and primary focus was on breaking the cycle of destructive family relationships and not necessarily just on restoration work. The SBB pilot meant that the original focus of the program had to change. The Newpin SBB more precisely targeted parents who had lost their children to the care system, and parents who were at risk of losing their children if their parenting did not improve.

A multidisciplinary team was formed to co-design a financial and practice model contract that retained the fidelity of the Newpin program but which sharpened its focus on the outcome measure of restoring children from OOHC, and sustaining those restorations.

The SBB opportunity, with its potential to raise private investment funds to support the maintenance and expansion of Newpin, was a compelling challenge and remains a work in progress. In the first 12 months of the pilot, two variations of the contract were mutually agreed, and the operations of three Newpin centres in Western Sydney were streamlined into two to improve resource utilisation and facilitate the opening of a new Newpin centre in a regional area in greater need of restoration services.

One year into the trial, the SBB has met its target – 68 per cent of children in care referred to the Newpin program have been restored to their families. Performance outcome and financial modelling have been revised based on the first year’s experience.

SBBs appear to be a promising answer to assist in fixing social ills. At the very least, the NSW SBB pilot has been a catalyst for further ideas about social investment and the measure of social outcomes.

However, the NSW SBB is at an early stage and the SBB’s worth or otherwise to Australia’s social care systems is not yet proven. The NSW SBB pilot will operate over a seven-year time frame and will be externally evaluated and the results tracked by an independent auditor.

Thus, much more evidence will be disseminated about the approach over time, and this knowledge will assist the non-government sector’s ability to contract for outcomes and improve the focus on data collection to aid performance measurement. It will also assist financial intermediaries and Government build greater understanding and knowledge of the impact for investing for public benefit.

The stories contained in this book are a testament to the resilience of the Newpin approach to withstand the challenges of a change in focus whilst still retaining its essence and fidelity.

Linda Mondy
Director Out-of-Home Care, UnitingCare Burnside
It represents the coming together of a very diverse group of people united in the goal of helping some of the most vulnerable families in our community: the NSW Government (and specifically the Department of Families and Community Services), UnitingCare Burnside, Social Ventures Australia (SVA), and a group of 59 different investors. The recent Newpin pilot is the first time in Australia this new approach to tackling some of society’s most entrenched problems has been tried.

Governments around the world are exploring a move to a ‘payment by outcomes’ model because it allows them to focus on what they want to be achieved, not dictate the way in which the work should be undertaken. The NSW Government worked collaboratively with UnitingCare Burnside and SVA to agree a payment structure under which taxpayers effectively share the financial benefits flowing from the social impact of the Newpin program (see Figure 1 – page 16).

Outcome payments by their nature are received after the work has been done (and costs incurred) and may never be received at all in the worst case scenario that the intervention has no impact. Because of this, UnitingCare Burnside needed working capital to be able to deliver the Newpin program, and investor partners willing to share in the downside risk. SVA developed a SBB structure that fairly balanced the risks and rewards to investors and UnitingCare, and was able to successfully raise the $7 million required in a short period of time.

The Newpin SBB investor group is the largest and most diverse of any social impact bond around the world, reflecting a high level of confidence in UnitingCare Burnside’s ability to make a lasting difference to the lives of the families they support.

Today, UnitingCare has security of funding for the Newpin program for years to come, the Government is benefiting from both a stronger society and a reduction in expenditure, and investors are receiving a social return and a financial return on their investment.

The social impact bond experiment has only just begun in Australia but, with the Newpin SBB, the first step forward has shown why excitement is building about this new approach around the world.

Elyse Sainty
Senior Advisor, Impact Investing Social Ventures Australia
Why social bonds?

A Newpin Social Benefit Bond investor’s story

Newpin is a remarkable program. It achieves real outcomes in a particularly tough space. Despite that success, attracting sustainable funding has always been a challenge. That changed with the launch of the Newpin Social Benefit Bond (SBB) in 2013.

Raising $7 million, the bond incorporates a service contract with government to generate an agreed level of measurable outcomes. It has enabled the number of Newpin centres to expand and has demonstrated strong results in its first year.

There are numerous advantages in buying or launching a social bond. The Newpin experience makes clear five attractions:

1. Sustainable funding. Rather than seeking annual grants, the bond is a one-off funding vehicle that needs no renewal. Once in place, it is self-sustaining over the long term.

2. Alignment. It’s a collaborative effort. The service provider, the government, the clients and the investors are all in it together. Each has an interest in making it work.

3. Managing risk. Challenging performance does not erode the service provided to clients. The cost of any shortfall is born by the investors, who can lose part, if not all, of their investments. Equally, they get return on their investment when the program achieves the desired result.

4. Funding options. Social bonds give foundations and donors the choice of holding an asset rather than making a grant. Bonds aligned with philanthropic targets can be managed as part of an endowment, freeing up grant funding for other activities.

5. Recycled returns. When the term of a successful social bond is completed, the funds are returned to the bondholder and are available for reinvestment in new initiatives.

The net effect is to free up more funds for philanthropic investment for solving complex social issues. The bonds provide an efficient vehicle for large foundations to generate a blended return from mission-aligned investments, while at the individual level, they give private donors the opportunity to participate in long-term support for their preferred charities.

Alan Hargreaves
Seven-year pilot study to assist 700 families

Government doesn’t have all the answers and every now and then there’s an opportunity to do something really different with an NGO. In 2013 UnitingCare Burnside raised $7 million to fund its Newpin Social Benefit Bond (SBB). The Bond aims to reduce the number of children in care and the seven-year pilot contract will assist around 700 families.

I started work as the contract manager of the Newpin SBB in Family and Community Services (FACS) in January 2013. My first priority was to work in partnership with UnitingCare Burnside and all the other stakeholders involved to get the Newpin project up and fully operational.

A key group among these stakeholders were FACS own staff in Community Service Centres (CSCs): our Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) and child protection teams. It was important that FACS caseworkers understood the Newpin model because they would be referring families to the service.

Some caseworkers would also be involved in another aspect of the Newpin SBB because the contract included a control group. We are not only trialling the SBB, we are also measuring the outcomes of the Newpin model in restoring children in OOHC to their families against restoration opportunities for families and using the information for measurement purposes.

I spent a lot of time in those early months explaining to caseworkers that Newpin is an intensive centre-based support program which runs for approximately 18 months and includes a combination of therapy, parenting courses and child/parent relationship building.

Along the way I learnt the important thing about pilots – expect the unexpected, it’s a pilot!

Among the unexpected things I discovered was a closer way of working in partnership. On this project FACS and UnitingCare Burnside staff planned together; we jointly developed tools like operations manuals and referral forms; we shared training; we shared venues – Newpin caseworkers started hot desking at Wyong CSC – and we also shared the learnings of the project.

Among the things we learned were that FACS and UnitingCare Burnside staff were not the only partners on this project. I was there when several parents in the Newpin program gave presentations about their experiences to rooms full of caseworkers. It was a confronting situation for both the parents and the caseworkers as the parents described their anger at having their children removed. The parents were respectful of the caseworkers and took responsibility for the past while sharing their positive feelings about what they had achieved through the program. It was then I realised that parents taking part in the Newpin saw themselves as partners too.

Adele Brookes
Principal Policy Officer, FACS
The Newpin Core Values

Support

Empathy

Equality

Respect

Self-determination

Newpin: Getting children home
Core values underpin practice

In recent years Newpin has experienced a time of significant change to meet the demands of the Social Benefit Bond (SBB). One of the challenges has been to maintain the integrity of the Newpin program. In order to adapt to the changes required, staff have developed an additional range of knowledge and skills whilst ensuring the core values of Newpin and the therapeutic support model are maintained. There has also been a focus to ensure the safety and well-being of the child remains at the forefront.

Staff at all levels have reflected on their practice. This has been a time to observe, think and share ideas about the way in which we work with families. How do we do what we do? Why do we do it in this way? Does it work and how can we do this differently? This has resulted in a process of continuous improvement that has been both formal and informal.

A fundamental aspect of Newpin that has been vigorously maintained is that of its core values. Many of the conversations within the centres are underpinned by the values of support, empathy, equality, respect and self-determination (SEERS). SEERS provide a shared language for discussing relationships and behaviour. While these values are central to the work of many organisations and programs, within Newpin they provide a focal point that is clearly articulated, that promotes skills for healthy relationships and that upholds the best interests of children.

The therapeutic support model has retained its focus with continuing discussions and tweaking of practice to ensure the increased administrative demands on staff do not detract significantly from time spent with parents and children. Most parents attending Newpin have experienced significant trauma in their lives and are working toward the opportunity to raise their children in a safe and nurturing home. It is imperative that the therapeutic nature of Newpin is not compromised. Increased training and regular group clinical supervision have contributed to maintaining the focus on therapeutic support work and positive outcomes for children, parents and families.

The combination of SEERS, therapeutic support groups and a dynamic Newpin team ensures that the integrity of the Newpin model has been maintained during a time of significant change. For the Newpin team the process has been one of laughter, frustration, creativity, innovation, achievement, grieving and pride.

Robyn Woodward
Manager, Newpin Centres Metro
Recognising magic moments

Staff have to build a strong, secure base for the families that come into Newpin. The boundaries between staff and parents are less obvious than in most professional settings. Staff members are almost seen as family and someone visiting the centre for the first time would not necessarily know straight away who is a staff member and who is a Newpin mother. However, the boundaries do exist, of course, and staff members need to know where they are. It is our responsibility to keep the families safe and to be clear that we are not their friends.

Newpin is most powerful when the staff work together as a cohesive team. We are responsible for providing a setting that enables the emotional containment of the adults and children who attend Newpin. As staff, we balance hard work and playfulness, using trauma-informed practice, to deliver opportunities for long-term change in adults whose experience of abuse in their childhoods is impacting on their parenting abilities. My role as Coordinator is to hold the team, in order that they can cope with the stresses that the work brings.

Staff always pick up on the little details and are genuinely interested in the people who attend Newpin. Many of the parents feel invisible or judged. We notice the good things about them and feed back to them in a genuine way. For instance, we make reflections to individuals such as, “I love what you said in group the other day, it was so powerful”.

The days at Newpin look like they are not planned, but they are. There is always a structure, but this has to be flexible. Recognising the magic moments is very important. We need to build on them and not miss opportunities.

Every staff member in the team has a different role and responsibility, but their input is valued equally. Each position has its own strains and stresses and it is important that staff members have an opportunity to share these and gain support. One of the exercises that I do with the team is the ‘clarifying’ exercise where we sit together and each names our biggest challenge in the workplace at that moment. It could be something very minor, but very frustrating and we need to value and support the person who is experiencing it. Often it is the little things that drive us insane! This exercise says that what happens in your day is as important as what happens in mine. We don’t need to have a solution, just to listen. This way of working is also modelling to staff how we work with families and has a knock-on effect for everyone in the centre. If I treat the staff respectfully, then they treat the Newpin parents in that way and then the parents treat their children respectfully.

Tracie Mitchell
Coordinator, Newpin St Marys Centre
Positive parenting can be learned

Tessa’s daughter, Charlie, is a bright and bubbly three year old who runs around her mum excitedly as I am introduced to them both. Tessa is keen to tell me about her experiences, as she is well aware of just how far she has come in the year that she has been attending Newpin.

Tessa had a difficult childhood and says that she never had a good relationship with her parents. Tessa’s mother was out most of the time and her father was an alcoholic which meant that she spent much of her childhood looking after her younger sister. Their parents were strict disciplinarians who believed that children should be “seen and not heard” and regularly used a belt to administer physical punishment.

Tessa describes how her father invited all sorts of people into the house and, as a result, Tessa was introduced to drugs at an early age. She proudly tells me how she came off drugs before Charlie was born and has been clean ever since. At 16 Tessa met Charlie’s father, Ryan, and she moved out of home to be with him. Ryan was only 17 years old and he had grown up in care, experiencing multiple placements by the age of five. Within a short space of time Tessa was pregnant and, at the time of Charlie’s birth, the couple were homeless. Luckily Ryan’s former foster carers took the young family into their home for the first year of Charlie’s life. Tessa describes this as a positive period during which she was introduced to a different experience of family life and parenting.

Things went downhill when the couple moved into their own place. To her horror Tessa looks back now and can recognise that she had begun to “turn into” her parents. Tessa had no comprehension of how to provide a safe space for Charlie and as a consequence numerous child protection notifications were made to the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS). Eventually these resulted in Charlie being removed into care, due to issues around neglect and poor hygiene. Tessa has a good understanding of why this had to happen and told me, “we weren’t good role models for our daughter”.

As part of the Care Plan, Tessa was ordered to participate in parenting programs. Tessa knew that she had to be a different type of mother and she said to herself, “I gave birth to this child and she deserves a lot better than I am giving her”. Tessa was instantly attracted to the Newpin program as it offered long term involvement with significant levels of support. Tessa told me how she knew that Newpin was for her as soon as the Family Worker came out to visit her and she quickly felt able to relate to the staff and to trust that they were working in the best interests of both Charlie and herself.

Soon after she started at Newpin, Tessa’s contact visits with Charlie were moved from the FACS office to the Newpin centre. Tessa describes how important these contact visits were, as she and Charlie had more time together and were both given the therapeutic and practical support that helped them overcome the trauma of the separation and loss.

Tessa proved to be a fast learner and much to everyone’s delight she was at Newpin for only three months before Charlie was restored to her care. Nine months on and Tessa and Charlie continue to attend the centre but are in the process of transitioning out. Tessa tells me, “I learn something new about my daughter and myself every day that I go to Newpin”. Tessa’s own childhood meant that not only did she have no sense of self-worth but she had no positive parenting experience to bring to her role as a mother. It is hard to imagine that this is the bright and capable young woman who sits before me talking confidently about the importance of routines, consistency and cuddles.

As told to Liz Sanders

Holly 6 years
Being an Aboriginal Family Worker in Newpin brings a different perspective to the work and a deep understanding of the impact of stereotyping. Having experienced personal judgement based on my ethnicity, I can really relate to how the Newpin mothers feel when they are judged.

It is not just the Aboriginal mothers who experience discrimination, often mums come into the centre having been called a “houso from Mount Druitt” or “a junkie” or worse and this contributes to the negative perceptions they already have of themselves.

Between 20-25 per cent of the families Newpin works with are Aboriginal and at times this has risen as high as 40 per cent. The Aboriginal mums know that I understand the historical, social and media biases that impact upon their daily experiences. We recently had a young Aboriginal mum at the Newpin centre, whose son was the fourth generation of children to be removed from their family. I was able to talk to her about breaking this intergenerational cycle and could help her distinguish between genuine child protection concerns and the government policy that had led to her mother being taken from the family simply because she was fair-skinned.

Another Aboriginal woman who was referred to Newpin had not wanted to engage with services previously, because of the lack of Aboriginal staff. She agreed to come to Newpin because I was there and I made the initial connection with her. In the end, however, her closest relationship with a staff member in Newpin was with our Play Facilitator who is Chinese. This illustrates just how important first impressions are when trying to engage a family.

Being Aboriginal also gives me easy access to local Aboriginal programs and I have built a good relationship with Aboriginal services across the area. I often accompany one of our Newpin mums to a service when she goes there for the first time. I also ensure that I am up to date with any government policies that impact on Aboriginal families.

As a Yuwaalaraay woman with a Bachelor’s degree in Social Science and a successful career I am proud to be a positive role model for Aboriginal families attending Newpin.

Jo Horton
Family Worker, Newpin St Marys Centre
When I first came to Newpin I was nervous and scared. I didn’t know if I would be allowed to take my baby home from hospital with me. It was pretty crazy on the first day that I walked through the door and heard the “Hello” song, but it didn’t take long to start building relationships with the other mums. We are there for each other through all the turmoil of not knowing what will happen with our children and in sharing the triumphs when children get returned home.

I had smoked marijuana for 17 years before coming to Newpin but have now been clean for 18 months. It was so helpful to have the support of others who understand and have been through similar things. My partner went to the Newpin Fathers’ Centre so that he could take part in men’s groups and so he would also learn what I was learning. We now have a much better understanding of our children and what we need to do to support them.

I have advised a few people to try and get into Newpin. Once you get past all that craziness, it’s a great atmosphere here. Everyone tries to help you and there are lots of groups and activities and fun things to do.

Sharon
Understanding the child protection system

When men initially come to the Newpin Fathers’ Centre they are often disenfranchised. They have recently been through the child protection system and have had their children removed from their care or from the care of their ex-partner. When staff first meet them, we frequently find that the dads have little understanding of the child protection system and are struggling to comprehend or acknowledge their part in the child’s removal. Sometimes the men have acted aggressively towards their Community Services caseworker, because they are ill equipped to manage their distress in a more appropriate manner. Needless to say, this can inflame the situation.

Once men join the Newpin program and begin to get support from other fathers and from the staff, they start to recognise how unhelpful their behaviour is. The conversations that take place within the formal and informal group settings provide an opportunity for the dads to understand the impact of their behaviours on others and to recognise that their feelings of anger often mask underlying feelings of sadness and despair.

It is lovely to see how the relationship between dads and their Community Services caseworkers improves over time and the fathers are so proud of how they can turn the relationship around. Of course, one of the biggest turnarounds is when dads can acknowledge that they were unable to keep their children safe. At this point they stop blaming others for what has happened and start to change their own behaviours, where needed.

Although the dads love their children dearly, many of them have not had positive male role models in their life and therefore have not had a chance to learn appropriate parenting skills. Spending time with their children in the playroom provides such a good opportunity for a dad to bond with his child and to develop an awareness of his child’s ever-changing needs, particularly their emotional needs. Building healthy attachments is further supported by the group programs that we run for fathers and their children together.

We all feel very privileged to be part of a program that is safe and friendly for dads to work on and achieve the changes needed to secure the restoration of their children. In the past six months the Newpin Fathers’ Centre has seen 13 children restored to their dads, some of whom are lone parents.

Hugh Houston
Coordinator, Newpin Fathers’ Centre
Out of the blue, a son

I didn’t know my son existed until he was four months old. I had split up from my son’s mother when she was in early pregnancy, as she had told me that the baby wasn’t mine. She was also using intravenous drugs at the time, which is another reason why I left.

One day, several months later, out of the blue, I got a text message from my ex-partner, telling me that the baby was mine and that she wanted me to meet him. I went and saw him and she told me that she had left the other guy, as he was violent and said that she wanted me back. Tom was four months old by then and Community Services was already involved because of the domestic violence. I didn’t want to go back to her, but I did want to know whether I was Tom’s father and I took a paternity test, which was positive. Shortly after this, Community Services removed Tom from his mother’s care, because of her drug use and inability to keep him safe. Tom was placed with a carer called Sandra.

I was adopted myself and didn’t want my son being brought up in care. My birth mother was very young when she had me and I spent the first six weeks of my life alone in hospital, before I went to a family. I have had a bit of a drug and alcohol problem in the past and was using cannabis when I first found out about Tom, but I put myself through detox straight away when he went into care.

I have had very positive communication with the Community Services workers from the start, whereas Tom’s mum didn’t want to engage with them. My caseworker referred me to Newpin and I wanted to join the program because I’m not going to let my son down.

Going to the Monday night groups at Newpin has taught me so much about being a parent. Spending time having contact with Tom in this environment is great. Being a single father is not common, but I have built a lot of courage from knowing that I am not alone. The workers really get to know who we are, which means that they can really support us.

Sandra was lovely with Tom and looked after him really well. She used to bring him to the twice weekly contact visits at Newpin. Tom has now moved in with my adoptive parents and I have moved back there too and do all the caring for Tom. This is part of Community Services’ staged plan for Tom to be restored to my full-time care.

Daniel
A researcher’s story

When our late CEO Jane Woodruff asked me to be part of the Newpin Social Benefit Bond (SBB) team she gave me pretty clear marching orders: “Your job is to make sure this financing thing doesn’t bugger Newpin up”. I knew exactly what she meant.

The SBB funding model was innovative and the first of its kind in the world to focus on restoring children in out-of-home care to their families. If we could find a way to measure and monitor outcomes and deliver on our promise then Newpin could open in new places and work with more families in need. This was our dream. What we could never do (and would never do) was trade off the program’s integrity and the respectful and healing relationships that are at its heart. There was no need for a trade-off. In Newpin relationships are pivotal to outcomes.

This is not to say that the SBB hasn’t changed Newpin. The Bond structure has seen a much greater focus on working with families who are seeking restoration outcomes. With ethics approval, one of my tasks was to work through case files to map the needs and circumstances of Newpin members. For someone who has not worked on the frontline of child protection the stories are seared into my memory. The pages resonated with complexity, risk and strength. Families had already endured so much and our practice needed to be more innovative and trauma informed if we were to realise our family restoration and preservation goals. This meant new assessment tools, greater accountability and staff training, clinical supervision and new ways of working with partners and siblings. This required cultural and practice shifts by a deeply committed group of staff. It wasn’t easy but they took it in their stride. There may have been the occasional gritting of teeth!

Newpin was always a good model which enabled pivotal relationships to be carefully rebuilt but there is something to celebrate in good programs that seek to be better. Through practice innovation and adaptation we now have more children returning safely home to families with higher needs. This is true to our social justice ethos. It is a testament to the strength and commitment of Newpin families and our staff. It has been a privilege to witness the journey.

Sally Cowling
Director, Research, Innovation and Advocacy
Friendships built on the bus

I love going out to pick up the mums in the morning. The mums let me know which days they will be coming in and I set off at 9:30. Sometimes I go to people’s homes and at other times I collect them from a pick-up point like Blacktown railway station. I love to see the children’s smiles when they see the Newpin bus pull up. I get to know the personalities of the mums and the children during our journeys together. Mums share a lot on the bus and I can tell straight away whether they have had a good night or not. I have had mums get very distressed, but they know that they will get support from the Family Workers as soon as they get into the centre and that I always let the workers know how everyone is going that day.

We often sing on the bus. We might play a CD of children’s songs or sometimes we sing along to the radio. Sometimes I have to pull over because an older child has managed to undo his or her seat belt, but the children know the bus rules and usually manage to follow them.

Often when I pick up a mum who is very stressed, another mum will get off the bus and help her get ready. I watch friendships being built on the bus.

At 2:15 in the afternoon I set off from Newpin to drop the families back home again. Usually people are in a good mood when they leave. They have all just sung the “Goodbye” song together and everyone is more relaxed.

Kylie White
Administration/Driver, Newpin Doonside Centre

A different way of doing things

DOCS took my kids because my ex-boyfriend was on drugs and would stalk me. He violated me and threatened to kill me. He hit my eldest daughter, who then went to live with my mum. The police didn’t do anything about it and because of the things that he did to me I was lost and frightened and felt powerless.

The DOCS caseworkers went to the children’s school and removed the boys. I was distraught. I had never had anything to do with child protection before. At first I didn’t get on with my DOCS caseworker. I was really lost and was smoking pot and I had had a drinking problem in my past. Then I got a different caseworker and she believed in me. She saw that I had clean urines and she referred me to Newpin.

I wasn’t sure about it, when I first attended Newpin. Some of the other mothers had their children with them and that was so hard. But I got involved in helping with other people’s children and I joined the Newpin groups and I started to see things differently. It made me open up my eyes and see that there is a different way of doing things. I know now that smack and shouting or yelling doesn’t work. I have learnt to talk to my children and explain things, instead of getting angry and frustrated, which is a waste of emotion. I have learnt how to manage my teenage daughter and I now know that I have to treat my children differently depending on their age.

My teenage daughter was restored first and then my youngest son was restored on my birthday last year and has been in my care ever since. My middle child still lives with his dad, but I am hoping to have him back with me.

The staff in Newpin have a lot of knowledge and the way they teach us is so clear. Newpin is a very welcoming place – everyone has been in the same situation. Seeing other people when I first came in, who had had their children restored made me stronger and made me want to work harder at getting my children home.

Now I know that I should have taken responsibility and walked away from my violent ex-partner. It was my job as a parent to look after my children.

Sally
I think that at times we learn as much from the parents who attend Newpin as they do from us. Bella was 17 when we met her. She had been in a violent relationship, was homeless and couch surfing; she had limited family support and her son had been in care since he was seven months old.

When Bella first came to Newpin she was committed to doing whatever was “required” of her to care for her son again. She was sometimes understandably distressed by the circumstances of her life, her unstable living situation and her lack of support. Yet her determination to build a different future never wavered. We could see right from the initial contact visits that took place in Newpin that Bella had a very strong bond with her baby and that she was attentive to his needs.

Bella demonstrated her commitment by coming to Newpin twice a week despite the fact that she was staying a long way away, the commute by public transport involved several stages, and she had no money. In fact, on one occasion at Newpin her shoes broke and Bella then couldn’t attend till the next week, when she could afford to replace them.

Bella lapped up the learning from each of the Personal Development Program modules and would often sit there taking notes. Her Community Services caseworker was able to see the progress that Bella was making and became increasingly supportive of restoration. The barrier then was that Bella did not have a home. It was a challenge to find stable supported accommodation, but as soon as this happened, the restoration was accelerated and Bella’s child was restored to her sole care. Seven months later, Bella was then able to take the next step and move into her own home with her son, and they are now enjoying living independently.

Bella has become a leader in her weekly Parent Support Group and can reflect on the experience of others and learn from it. Having lived with the impact of domestic violence, it is impressive to hear her talk now about her understanding of what a healthy relationship looks like.

Bella has now turned 18 and is planning to undertake Technical and Further Education (TAFE) or other studies when she completes her time at Newpin. Getting her son back into her care was the most important thing to her. Bella says that Newpin was a place where the people were genuine, honest and on her side.

Meryn O’Brien
Family Worker, Newpin Doonside Centre
It’s hard to remember a specific occasion with a dad attending the Newpin Fathers’ Centre, that I would call a “light bulb” moment, where I could see that they had “got it” as a result of some pearl of wisdom or inspired act on my behalf. I am not saying that these moments haven’t occurred. I am saying that most likely I will not know that they have occurred.

In a long-term program such as Newpin, great change can and does take place in a parent’s relationship with their child and a child’s relationship with their parent and their world. These changes are gradual and subtle, which in my opinion make them more likely to endure long after families move on from our program.

I was talking to a father about his daughter a few days ago. This amazing little girl is also an extremely fearful and insecure little girl. Not surprising when you know her history. Her father was insisting that she was just a normal kid, that there were a lot of kids like her and in fact he was just like her as a kid and he turned out alright.

As we sat and unpacked the fears that affected his childhood I shared with him similar experiences I had as a child. We talked about how good it would have been to have had someone to understand us and guide us through our kid fears and how these fears don’t always leave us, they just change their appearance. At one point he said to me, “I never would have guessed someone like you would have gone through that kind of stuff too”.

Our conversation eventually returned to his daughter and I was able to talk to him about the possibility of helping her now so that she doesn’t have to pretend she is alright in the future when she is really not alright.

The end of our conversation focused around his questions such as what could actually help her, what age could she get counselling, etc... I guess this could be seen as a “light bulb” moment. Time will tell. My hope is that this is one of many conversations that will help this father recognise the deep needs that his daughter has, and that she will be looking to him to guide her in having these needs met.

Graeme Kay
Play Facilitator, Newpin Fathers’ Centre
Safe and comfortable on the journey

I am a contact worker with the Department of Family and Community Services. I transport children to and from their contact visits with their birth families and, in some cases, I supervise and report on the visits.

I believe that transporting children for contact visits is an important role. At times children are upset when they have to say goodbye to their parents and it is my job to make sure they feel safe and comfortable on the journey to and from their carers.

I have been very impressed with the supportive atmosphere at Newpin. From day one I felt comfortable going into the centre. I feel the staff are very genuine and always welcoming. They are great role models for the fathers and the children seem to settle well when we arrive at the program. I have observed the staff quickly build rapport with the children and the parents. The environment they create feels a bit like a family.

Paula
Contact Worker, FACS

Setting realistic goals

Newpin is a supportive group that helps a lot. They pretty much show us a better way of disciplining our children and teach us how important it is to listen to our kids.

I was born in Samoa and I got brought up with harsh discipline. I was 11 when I first moved to Australia. I have no family in Sydney now. My mum is in Brisbane and the only support I have is Newpin. My three kids were taken into care nine months ago, because their dad left them at home by themselves. He was violent to me and he assaulted me so badly that I was in hospital and couldn’t really look after them. He left them alone at home and went out to get something to eat.

I left him because of the long history of domestic violence. My family was my partner’s family. So I lost them too, when I left.

Newpin helps me with being positive. I sit down with the Newpin staff and I set goals which help me to know what to work on. When the staff say they are going to do something, they do it straight away.

I don’t have anywhere of my own to live at the moment so my goals are to get a home of my own, to get a job and, most importantly, to get my children back.

Natia
More than numbers on a spreadsheet

I have really enjoyed working on the Newpin program financials. An accountant’s work can occasionally be dry, cut into regular monthly reporting blocks, and if you don’t know enough about the programs that you’re working with, sometimes it can seem like just numbers on a spreadsheet. But the nature of the Newpin contract is such that you really need to understand the details of the program and what’s happening with every family at each centre, in order to make sense of the numbers. There are so many factors that impact both the funding that we receive from the government, and the return we pay to investors, that the finance team need to understand each element and what that means in real life in order to get the reporting right. This requires working closely with operational management to understand the inner workings of the program.

My team meets regularly with Newpin operations management to discuss results, issues, improvements in reporting methods, and forecasts for the future. When challenges arise, as is always the case with such a pioneering contract, we discuss them together.

The Social Benefit Bond is the first of its kind in Australia, and I am proud to be involved with this innovative social financing project. It is an excellent model that has proven to be a winning formula for the government, the investors, our organisation and of course the Newpin clients.

Since the funding for the Newpin program is based on performance, we report client outcomes every month, so my team is acutely aware of the successes and challenges of the Newpin program. Sometimes I tear up when I hear sad stories about tough times the Newpin parents have endured in their lives. There’s a reason I work in an office, I’m clearly not cut out for case work! But I celebrate every restoration because I understand what that means for that child and that family, the pride and joy felt by both the parents and the Newpin centre staff.

Michelle Simon
Accountant, UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families
“...the progress that Katarina was able to make over her 18 months in Newpin was remarkable and we watched her blossom into a confident and competent parent.”

One family that particularly touched me was that of Katarina and her baby, Helena. Katarina was referred to Newpin Doonside Centre by FACS when Helena was three months old. Helena had been removed at birth due to Katarina and her partner’s drug use and concerns over Katarina’s intellectual capacity, as a result of a brain injury sustained in a domestic violence incident with a previous partner.

When Katarina first started coming to Newpin, she lacked any parenting skills and had no attachment to her baby. She was unable to pick up her baby’s cues and restoration seemed unlikely. However, the progress that Katarina was able to make over her 18 months in Newpin was remarkable and we watched her blossom into a confident and competent parent. I think that much of this happened because of the support, respect and acceptance that we offered Katarina.

Katarina now has Helena in her full-time care, has moved on from Newpin and is attending TAFE. FACS has closed the case and it was a wonderful moment in Newpin when the FACS caseworker came in and said goodbye to Katarina – the same caseworker who had removed Helena from Katarina’s care. There were tears all around as she acknowledged what a great mum Katarina has turned out to be.

Anita Ings
Coordinator, Newpin Doonside Centre
Blowing away male stereotyping

How do we view men within the field of child protection? Do we hold stereotypes about men in relation to child abuse, women and children?

Newpin works specifically with fathers towards the return of the children from out-of-home care. When I became a manager within the Newpin program I was given the opportunity to co-facilitate a six-week, men-only Newpin fathers therapeutic support group on parenting, the first time I had been involved with a group of men in this way. It raised a number of questions for me. Would we see stereotypical male behaviours such as competitiveness, closed emotions, a failure to take responsibility for their actions, and perhaps for their children? Would men complain about unfair systems, bemoan their partner’s failings, and claim their own innocence in the events that happened?

After the first two hours of the group, all of the above misconceptions were forcefully blown away. Instead, what I experienced was a group of men who mostly took full responsibility for their situations, their part in relationship breakdowns, and the removal of their children into out-of-home care. Even when it was clear that their partner was unable to care for their children through drug or alcohol addiction and that that responsibility fell to them, each father took responsibility for their own inaction in protecting their children.

In the safe environment of the support group, each of the fathers expressed love for their children, along with a true sadness that their children were not living with them. The men talked freely about their own experiences of childhood abuse, their poor father figures, and of the violence that they were subjected to as they grew up. The fathers were never competitive during the group, instead they showed a level of compassion and empathy that was contrary to the male stereotypes I had been anticipating. There was sensitivity, a sense of a willingness to listen to each other and to recognise and support fellow fathers in sharing the pain of losing their children.

In the weeks following the group those fathers who were working towards restoration were able to resolve their feelings of anger towards their partners, and show compassion and understanding for them. They learnt how to show emotion and frustration without aggression or intimidation, especially towards their FACS caseworkers that they had previously blamed for the removal of their children.

In part – and this is the experience of staff at Newpin – the task of having restoration considered for a father by FACS can be more challenging and time-consuming than for mothers leading to frustration with, and antipathy towards, FACS workers by fathers.

The successful restoration rate of the Newpin Fathers’ program has shown that men are very able to provide the safe and nurturing environments that their children need.

Decision-making on a child’s future therefore needs to be based on proper investigation and assessment of the suitability, stability and abilities of either parent to care for their children, and the process must avoid being drawn into anti-male stereotypes based on erroneous beliefs about men’s capacities to parent.

Ross Smith
Manager, Newpin Projects
The relief of child restoration

My son and stepdaughter were restored to me five months ago, having spent six months in care.

Their mother had previously had DOCS in her life when she was with a different partner and had had a child taken into care. When our son was born DOCS came to visit to see how we were managing, but then left us alone. However, we began to have trouble with our neighbours who made malicious calls to DOCS. We even had the police come to the door on one occasion. We let them in and they could see that everything was okay.

DOCS were satisfied that we were looking after the children all right and wrote to us to say that they had closed the case. Then just after Christmas my partner was arrested and she was sent to jail. Because there had been a previous allegation of domestic violence against me (which was also malicious), DOCS decided that I was not a fit person to look after the children and they turned up at the day care centre, when I was picking the children up and took them into care.

Having the children removed was the worst thing that has ever happened to me and I have had a lot of things go on in my life. Luckily DOCS referred me to the Newpin Fathers’ Centre. I was happy about it because it meant that other people could watch me with my children and see how I was with them. I can’t thank Newpin enough. I’ve learnt loads of stuff and can also support other dads in the group. I didn’t have a family when I was growing up and spent 20 years incarcerated. When I had my son I wanted it to be different for him. I used to find it so hard when contact came to an end each time, but the Newpin staff helped me learn how to manage it, so that I didn’t upset the children.

I always believed that I would get my kids back and after six months my son and step-daughter were restored to my sole care. It was a big relief.

John
When play becomes therapy

When I set up the playroom in the morning I put out activities that promote growth in the mother-child dyad. I focus on the creativity side and the strengths of the particular mothers and children that are in Newpin that day. I encourage the mothers to choose an activity or a toy for their child to play with and I focus on the strengths of the mothers and children.

Many of the mums find it hard to sit and play. They tell me that they have never played like this before, and their own experience of trauma and their difficult childhoods get in the way of the play. These mothers are often incredibly resistant to being in the playroom and struggle to give their child one-on-one time and to be in the moment. I encourage the mum to spend very short periods of time concentrating on her child and then we build this up over time. I help the mum build a better connection to her child through reflecting back on what is happening and encouraging her to notice. I will say things like, “look at the way you are holding your baby and how she is looking up at you.”

I interpret the children’s actions into emotions, encouraging mothers not to look at the behaviours, but rather at what the child is attempting to communicate. So I often ask the parent, “what do you think your child is trying to say when he does this?” One of the children who attends the centre used to become very distressed and would cry for long periods of time. He couldn’t cope with all the other children running around and would seek comfort from me. I was very aware of how this might feel for his mum. So I got the mum to sit next to me and would gradually move him over to his mum, while constantly affirming to the mum that he wanted her.

What I do with children and their parents in the playroom looks natural, but it is planned.

Mei Chen
Play Facilitator, Newpin St Marys Centre
Purposeful contact leads to reunion

I have lived through a couple of violent relationships. My first partner’s children from a previous relationship had been taken into care before I knew him. When I had my first daughter everything was good for three years, but then my partner started having problems with drugs and with gambling and he became abusive towards me. We lost our house and were moving around a lot. I found out that I was pregnant again and we moved into a house with friends. One day we had a big argument and the police were called and my partner was removed from the house.

I went to a refuge for a while and then I moved into my grandfather’s house with my aunt, as my grandfather had become ill and needed looking after. I met my youngest child’s father while I was living there. DOCS became involved with the family because of my new partner’s violence and they removed all three children. Looking back I can see that the Court was right and that the children were at risk.

A month after the children were removed I left my violent partner and at that point DOCS referred me into Newpin. I had never heard of it before and I was a bit nervous going there as I didn’t know what to expect and didn’t know anyone. Walking in the door for the first time was hard, but after the second visit I was okay.

After a couple of weeks I started having contact with the children at Newpin. I had been lucky as I had always been given a lot of contact with them, but contact at the Newpin centre was really good as we had lots of space and activities and there were other families having their contact at the same time as us.

My DOCS caseworker could see the progress that I was making and the restoration took place in a planned way, during a six-month period. Over time I was getting more and more contact and then I started having the children to stay overnight at the weekends and my time with them continued to increase slowly. That worked very well for me, as I hadn’t had the children with me for 18 months and I needed to learn how to be the best mum that I could.

Newpin helped me gain more knowledge around how to interact with my children and how to manage their behaviour at home.

Veronica
Routine with real purpose

We love starting and ending the days with the “Hello” and “Goodbye” songs, because they bring everyone together and lift the mood. Singing not only helps with language development, it is also known to play a significant role in lifting depression. The serotonin release from the rhythmic movement that accompanies the singing adds to the therapeutic impact. Additionally, when we sing the “Hello” song, each child and adult picks which of the St Luke’s bears that most represents how they are feeling that day. It is a great way to begin to teach emotional literacy for adults and children alike.

We use visual prompts to support our daily activities using pictures depicting such things as morning tea time and hand washing time. It is imperative that we have routines in the Newpin centre. The children need routines, as it helps them feel secure. Everyone gains from the emotional containment experienced through knowing what to expect for the day. Many of the parents don’t have and have never had routines in their lives and in Newpin they learn about the importance of structure and how to put realistic routines in place at home.

One of our daily events is around food. At lunchtime we all eat together. Meal times can often be stressful for families with young children, however, the staff are able to support the parents that are struggling and parents regularly support each other. Some of the parents that come to Newpin never sat down together with their own parents for meals, while others might have been harshly disciplined as children if they talked during meals. In Newpin we are modelling a way of coming together over food that is enjoyable and manageable.

In the life of a busy Newpin centre, things don’t always go to plan. Consequently, we ensure that our daily routines are not rigid and that there is flexibility in the way we respond to events.
Group support makes vital difference

I have a daughter aged three and a half and a son aged 18 months. My two kids were removed because I was in an extremely violent relationship. My ex-partner broke my jaw and I had to go into hospital to have a metal plate put in. After the children were removed and we were trying to get them back, when I turned up at court I had a broken nose and a black eye. Something changed in me that day and I never went back to him after that. Instead I went straight from Court to a refuge. As I had left my partner, DCOS referred me to Newpin to work towards restoration.

Altogether my kids were in care for 15 months. Once I started Newpin, the Court said that I could work towards having restoration in 12 months, but in the end I managed it in seven months. I was aware that it would be hard when they came home, because of what we had talked about in Newpin and so I was prepared for it.

If I hadn’t been at Newpin I reckon the chances of me getting my kids back would have been pretty slim and I don’t know if I could have done it without the support of other Newpin mothers and the staff.

The Play Facilitator has helped me put strategies in place to manage my daughter’s behaviour. My kids love being at Newpin. They enjoy the activities and being with the other children. I have learnt new ways of talking to my children. I have learnt about the impact that domestic violence has on children.

My family are not very supportive. It would have been nice to have my mum around but, at Newpin, there is always someone to talk to and to offer support to both a parent and their child. I have learnt a lot from the Newpin groups. The more I get a chance to do groups the more that I get out of them. It is helpful that the other mums have all been through similar experiences and it is great that we support each other.

Jasmine

Newpin: Getting children home
Child protection is very close to my heart and I have worked hard throughout my career to ensure that dads receive the services that they need. My father was violent to me and my mum, but no-one gave him the opportunity to step up and change his behaviours.

Newpin recognises that their family of origin impacts upon fathers and I have seen personally just how consequential generations of family harm can be. It is really special to be able to walk alongside a dad with compassion and kindness and to provide them with a dedicated male space in which fathers can process their previous experiences and strive for change.

I have had the privilege of setting up the Newpin Fathers’ Outreach Program at Wyong. The new Newpin centre on the Central Coast is such a good space for families. The fact that we are working holistically, with the whole family, is so good. It is not just about the group work, or the one on one, or the advocacy – we do it all.

We break down the barriers between the dads and their FACS caseworkers. The staff are all committed to a consultative process which, from the client’s perspective, is another strength. Even though we sometimes have to write difficult reports on people, we have been honest with them throughout their time in Newpin and do it in a strengths-based way which allows us to maintain relationships.

Recently I have been working with a guy who was a skinhead and a violent teenager. He has made the most massive turnaround in his life and is now the main carer of his two young children who have been restored. Newpin is full of such stories.

Ray Lenton
Family Worker, Newpin Fathers’ Centre
Setting boundaries for safety

Wyong is the newest of the Newpin centres and we have only been open a few months, so we are particularly proud of Michelle who was the first Newpin Wyong mum to have her children restored to her care.

Michelle is an Aboriginal woman with a 10-year-old daughter and a two-year-old son who was born while Michelle was in prison. When the children were first removed they were placed in the care of Michelle’s mother, but they were then put into foster care due to concerns that their grandmother was in a violent relationship. As soon as Michelle was released from prison she and her mother moved away from the area where they had been living and went to the Central Coast. This allowed Michelle to break her ties with old friends who could have encouraged her back into criminal activity.

Michelle was referred to Newpin by her FACS worker, who had observed Michelle’s close bond with her children during their contact visits together and who was able to identify Michelle’s potential.

When Michelle joined Newpin we hadn’t even moved into our new building and we saw her weekly at a temporary group that we were running in a local community centre. Despite the fact that Michelle had previously had only limited contact with her little boy, it was obvious that they had a close connection and it was lovely to observe them together. Once relocated into our Alison Road premises, we were able to start running groups and Michelle began attending the program twice weekly. The children were brought into the centre by their foster carer. We made sure that the carer had an opportunity to look round the centre so that she felt comfortable about where the children in her care were spending their day. Michelle had built a good relationship with the carer, which was very beneficial for the children.

Four months after starting at Newpin, Michelle’s children were restored to her care. Michelle has grown significantly in confidence since starting the program. She participates in all aspects of the Newpin program and is quiet and reflective in groups and her contributions are always relevant. We have observed how well she is able to set boundaries to keep herself and her children safe. Her little boy loves coming in to Newpin and playing with the other children. We have seen a real change in him since he has returned to his mother’s care. He is now far more animated and seems to be a very happy child.

Michelle is a great role model for the mothers coming into the centre. She is able to lead by example and, as the first mother to have her children restored, she has given hope to the others in her group.

Newpin Wyong Centre staff
When familiarity breeds security and joy

Our role, as staff in the playroom, is to create a safe space where children are happy and their developmental needs are being met. We know which children will be coming in each day and we tailor the activities to the needs of those individual children.

We all know how small children love to watch the same DVD time after time and how they derive comfort from knowing what will happen next. For the same reasons, most of the Newpin children respond positively to familiar objects in the playroom. We get to know each child very well and are able to ensure that every little person coming in that day has one of their favourite toys available for them.

The playroom is set up with a number of different activities that offer active and passive play. The home corner, reading area and babies section always stay the same so that the children know what to expect. We have a large sandpit that parents and their children are encouraged to use and a very popular climbing frame with a slide attached. There are all sorts of opportunities for children to develop their gross and fine motor skills.

We find that some children that come to Newpin might not previously have had their uniqueness recognised and Newpin is a place where this journey begins. They are learning how special they are.

We use a number of different techniques to help children to recognise and articulate their feelings. Sometimes the mums need help with this too, as they have not ever been able to identify and express their feelings appropriately. Many of the mums have never experienced play and we love it when they are able to join in the playroom activities for themselves.

We plan well and we work hard to create a therapeutic environment for the children that appears relaxed and inviting.

Kathy Doyle, Cathy McDermott and Lyn Rushby
Playroom Facilitators, Newpin Doonside Centre
The quiet, much loved achiever

It was with great sadness that we said goodbye to our Play Educator Jennifer McNamara who passed away in August 2014.

Jen had been with Newpin for 15 years and was known and well loved by many. Jen started her Newpin journey as a member at the Bidwill centre and was a part of the first group to go through the program.

In her time with Newpin, Jen completed all programs and was a member of the second choir group which recorded the “Back on Track” CD. Jen became a befriender then a volunteer. While Jen was volunteering she applied for a casual Play Worker position and was successful. Jen held this position for a few years working across the four centres in Western Sydney. Jenny joined the St Marys team at the beginning of 2011 as our Play Educator. In that time Jenny completed a traineeship and attained her Certificate III in Children’s Services. Jen then went on to complete her Diploma in Children’s Services in May 2014.

Newpin was such an important part of Jenny’s life and Newpin loved her. Jenny had a quiet way about her; she never yelled, she rarely got angry, she quietly overcame whatever obstacles were thrown her way. Jenny smiled often, she laughed and had fun at every opportunity she could find and gave so much to the Newpin children. Jenny loved deeply and truly and was a loyal friend. A quote Jenny loved was, “you can’t change the direction of the wind but you can adjust your sails,” something Jenny did many times over in her life.

I had known Jen for 15 years and in that time I had always been in awe of her ability to accept difference and show true acceptance to everyone. This is the essence of Newpin.

Jen will be missed so much by all of us but she will be never forgotten: a wonderful woman who had so much courage and worked so hard to make the lives of her own children and other people’s children happier, healthier and safer.

We love you Jen.

Tracie Mitchell
Coordinator, Newpin St Marys Centre
Spontaneity of the best kind

I enjoy delivering the Family Play Program individually to a parent and one of their children. Working one to one with a mother and her child provides a safe space for them to explore their relationship. We give the mum permission to enjoy her time with her child.

An example that comes to mind, when I try and describe the benefits of the Family Play Program, is of a mother and her two-year-old child who was in care.

This mum hadn’t really wanted to come to Newpin as she felt resentful and that she was being told to jump through hoops in order to be considered for the restoration of her child. At first she found it hard to be with her son in the playroom during their contact sessions and was uncomfortable with the other families being around her.

However, when she started the Family Play Program, this mum was able to relax more, to demonstrate spontaneity and connect with her son in a more meaningful way. I remember one particular occasion during the program, when her little boy ran over and hugged his mum, and I could see how overwhelmed with emotion she was by his action. This enabled me to reflect on how guarded she was with some of her other interactions with him and in turn led to conversations between us that allowed us to explore this. I have no doubt that the Family Play Program was the catalyst for this mum to build enough trust within Newpin to result in the restoration of her son to her full-time care.

Lyn Rushby
Play Facilitator, Newpin Doonside Centre

Understanding emotional and developmental needs

Tara was 38 years old when she was referred to Newpin. She had a history of a violent partner causing her to turn to drugs to escape her situation, leading to her being unable to care for her (then) young children properly. Her two oldest children now live with their father and Tara has no contact with them. Her two children with her subsequent violent partner (who died of a drug overdose) live in separate foster families. Community Services had previously attempted to return the children to Tara upon her completion of a drug rehabilitation program. However, the stress of the situation was too much for her and she returned to drugs. The children returned to the care system.

In October 2010, Tara gave birth to another son, Jack. Her new partner was also violent and Tara was unable to stay drug free, so Jack was removed from her care at the age of five months. Two years later, Tara was referred to the Newpin program to see if she could make sufficient changes to enable her to meet Jack’s needs. Tara had spent very little time with Jack and there was no healthy bond between them. However, Tara had made some steps in the right direction: she was no longer with her violent partner and had completed rehab again. Newpin needed to help her address a number of issues in order for her to have any hope of being a full-time mum to Jack.

These included:

- Lack of parenting skills
- Limited understanding of Jack’s emotional and developmental needs
- No support network
- Difficulty in managing stress and other emotions
- Tara’s need to develop awareness of the impact of domestic violence and to stay drug free.
At first, Tara found it hard to settle into the program. She was overwhelmed by the number of parents and children attending the centre and was very critical of other mothers’ behaviours. However, little by little, through her involvement in the groups and the nurturing that she received from staff, Tara began to relax and to relate to other Newpin parents. She was able to start reflecting on her own situation and began to develop new strategies for coping. Tara was given considerable support to enable her to build a relationship with her son.

Tara’s Community Services caseworker was so impressed with the changes that Tara had made that she recommended the restoration of Jack to Tara’s care and he went home just prior to his third birthday.

Tara and Jack continued to attend Newpin after the restoration. Tara acknowledges that this was a very difficult time for her and that, without the support of Newpin, she would likely have fallen back into old habits. Instead she and Jack are flourishing. Tara proudly talks about how she saved up her money and recently took Jack on his first family holiday ever, to a caravan park in Port Macquarie.

Tara is now coming to the end of her time at Newpin, but is giving back to the program in the role of “befriender”, supporting new mothers to attach to the centre and to reap the benefits that she has from the program.

As told to Liz Sanders

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Embracing family

I am the foster carer for Charlie, the baby of one of the dads who attends the Newpin Fathers’ Centre. I bring the baby to have contact with his dad once a week.

When I first went to the Newpin centre I felt very welcomed and was shown round the centre and introduced to everyone. I had been concerned that I might not feel comfortable, but the Newpin Coordinator made me feel as if I am part of the “Newpin family”.

Everyone welcomes Charlie when he comes in and all of the staff members are lovely.

I think that it’s good that Charlie’s dad has the opportunity to be around other fathers.

Debbie

Foster carer
Newpin – "eighth wonder of the world"

I first came to Newpin after my two sons were taken into care. I was devastated when they were removed, as I had struggled hard to look after them despite their mother’s addiction to prescription drugs. Looking back though, I can see that DOCS made the right decision and that our home was not a safe place to be for the children.

I learnt so much from attending Newpin. I learnt how to recognise my children’s needs, how to communicate with them and manage their behaviours appropriately. I learnt that there is more to life than just putting food on the table. Attending the groups and getting support from the other blokes, as well as from the staff, got me through that time and after a lot of hard work on my part, the boys were restored to my sole care. And that’s why I wanted to be a volunteer.

I find it very rewarding just to know that with what I went through, I can support other dads to have hope and to get through it too. I just can’t give enough back to the place. When you attend the centre as a Newpin parent you are most concerned about yourself and what’s going to happen with your own children. As a volunteer I can concentrate on helping others. It makes me feel on top of the world. Being a volunteer has given me the confidence to ask for things and to be proactive. I don’t wait for things to come to me anymore. I am now able to stand up in front of a group of people and talk about what has happened in my life and how I have turned things around.

I have always described Newpin as the “eighth wonder of the world”. Places like Newpin give you hope. As much as you put in, you get back.

Ben
Volunteer, Newpin Fathers’ Centre
New hope

I came to live in Australia from Samoa when I was 19 years old. I have three daughters; two live with me but my baby, Talia, was taken into care when she was three months old because they thought that I wasn’t looking after her properly. My husband was very sad when she went. He cries a lot, but he will be starting a group at the Newpin Fathers’ Centre next month.

I want Talia back at home where she belongs. I see her four times a week at Newpin. My other two girls enjoy coming to Newpin to play and to see their baby sister. Newpin is beautiful. I love the singing and I always help to clear up.

It is my job to look after my children. It’s not nice to give them to other parents to look after. I thought that they had taken Talia for good, but now I have hope.

Elei

Coming out of the shell

DOCS got involved in my life when I was living in a refuge because my partner had been violent. DOCS didn’t remove the children but referred me to Newpin for extra support as I was very isolated.

I was nervous when I first came into the Newpin centre. I didn’t know what to expect or what people would be like. However, by my second week I started coming out of my shell and talking with the other mums who were all nice and friendly. Most of the other mums were in a different situation to me as their children were in care. Although at first it was hard to empathise with them, I live for my kids so I can imagine how awful it would be not having them with me.

When I came to Newpin I had low self-esteem. I had no confidence – but I grew balls at Newpin. When I first came to Newpin, if I had to talk to my kids’ father I would feel scared and would agree to anything he said. Now I can stand up for myself and for my children.

I have enjoyed the groups at Newpin. The Circle of Security was confusing at first, but I have seen how much what I learnt in the group has really worked with my middle son. He doesn’t run off any more, but stays and plays where I can see him.

I am just coming to the end of my time at Newpin but I would tell other mums that they should go there. It’s good to be just mums together in the group and you learn how to bond with your children.

Janice
Finding a voice

When I think about the essence of the Newpin Fathers’ Centre, one family that immediately comes to mind is Stuart and his daughter Rachel. Stuart was a very quiet man who, when we first met him, was unable to speak up for himself. The referral from FACS stated that he was diagnosed with a learning disability.

Although they were separated, Stuart had had quite a bit of contact with Rachel when she was living with her mother. Rachel was taken into care because of her mother’s drug use and Stuart was referred to the Newpin Fathers’ Centre by FACS to see if he was capable of providing good enough parenting for Rachel to be restored to his care.

During Stuart’s contact sessions with Rachel it soon became clear that he was very attentive to the needs of his daughter, was able to follow her lead in play sessions and could set appropriate boundaries. In short, Stuart had a lot of skills that I witnessed in the playroom. However, because he was so quiet in voicing his opinions with his caseworkers and other professionals, Stuart was given little credit for his abilities.

At first the FACS caseworker supervised the contact visits at Newpin, but over time the caseworker started to trust our judgment and allowed us to supervise the sessions. Stuart and I began to have conversations in the playroom. He started to realise that it was okay to voice his opinion and that his opinions were valid. We could see that Stuart was able to take on concepts and it was important for us to empower him to be able to express his thoughts to his caseworker. It was gratifying to see how Stuart was able to break down the barriers with his caseworker and we were all delighted when Rachel was restored to his sole care.

Graeme Kay
Play Facilitator, Newpin Fathers’ Centre
From grief to joy

Rick is a softly spoken man who is proudly cuddling his 22-month-old son Jacob when I arrive at the centre to talk to him. Dressed in his bus company uniform, Rick will be straight off to work once the Newpin day is over.

I have not met Rick before, but he is happy to share his story with me in the knowledge that it could help other fathers achieve what he achieved two weeks ago: a Final Court Order, stating that Jacob will return home to Rick’s sole care on 26 April this year.

Rick grew up in Western Australia, where his family all still live. He worked in the mines in Kalgoorlie until four years ago when he moved to Western Sydney to be with Jacob’s mother, Carol. Theirs was a rocky relationship characterised by family violence and Carol’s alcoholism. Carol already had two sons from a former relationship and FACS had previously been involved with the family as a result of Carol’s drinking.

When Carol was pregnant with Jacob she managed to stay off alcohol but unfortunately this was not to last. When Jacob was only a few months old Carol fell pregnant again and she gave birth to a premature baby boy, Cameron, at the end of 2011. Cameron was in the hospital special care unit for a number of weeks before coming home to be with his parents and brother.

On Anzac Day 2012 Cameron died unexpectedly. Rick, who is still undergoing bereavement counselling, describes the agony of losing his baby and how it felt as if time was standing still as he watched other people going about their normal business while his world fell apart. On the evening of Cameron’s funeral, Rick got drunk and Carol made an allegation that Rick had been violent towards her. Two days later Rick was arrested and Jacob was taken into care. At the time, the FACS caseworker told Rick that she believed him to be a “violent alcoholic”. She later apologised to Rick for having said this. The charges against Rick were soon dropped as they were regarded as malicious. By this point, however, Jacob was in care and FACS were making it clear that they did not think that he would be able to return to the care of his mother. Rick was given an ultimatum that if he was not able to step up and prove himself to be a suitable father then Jacob would be in care until his 18th birthday.

Rick’s FACS caseworker referred him to the Newpin Fathers’ program in June 2012 and Rick has been a regular attender ever since. Rick talks about how much he has learnt from the different aspects of the program. The parenting program and therapeutic support group have taught him both practical parenting skills and emotional skills. As a result, Rick now has a good knowledge of Jacob’s evolving physical, emotional, educational and social needs and has developed his own self-awareness and self-esteem. Rick puts his learning down not only to the compassion and expertise of the staff, but also to the experience and support of other fathers who are all at different stages of a similar experience. As Rick told me, “people respect each other, because everyone is at Newpin because they love their children”.

After attending Newpin for a while, Rick began to have his contact with Jacob at the centre rather than at the FACS office. This gave him more time with his son and provided a nurturing and supportive environment in which he could learn new skills and develop the parent/child bond. FACS were impressed with Rick’s progress and soon increased the amount of contact that he was having with Jacob. Jacob was then restored permanently to Rick on 26 April, the day after the first anniversary of the death of Cameron. This was a time of high emotion for Rick but has opened a new chapter in his life and the life of his son.

As told to Liz Sanders
Glossary

Burnside – UnitingCare Burnside
CSC – Community Service Centre
Community Services – The NSW Department of Family and Community Services
DOCS – The NSW Department of Community Services (now known as FACS)
FACS – The NSW Department of Family and Community Services (formerly known as DOCS)
NCFAS – North Carolina Family Assessment Scale
Newpin – New Parent Infant Network
NGO – Non-Government Organisation
NSW – New South Wales
OOHC – Out-of-home care
PDP – Personal Development Program
Restoration – Reunification
SBB – Social Benefit Bond
SEERS – Support, Empathy, Equality, Respect and Self-determination – Newpin’s values
SVA – Social Ventures Australia
TAFE – Technical and Further Education
TSG – Therapeutic Support Group

Newpin: Courage to change together

Helping families achieve generational change

For further information about Newpin and to purchase the Newpin book, please see www.newpin.org.au