

Active play: only a hop, skip and jump away

Increasing participation in physical activity through community sport and active recreation

This project is part of a VicHealth funding program known as PICSAR, which aims to increase participation levels in community sport and active recreation amongst people with disabilities and those from low socio-economic, Indigenous and new arrival communities.

The organisation

Glastonbury Child and Family Services (GCFS) is a non-government organisation which has been serving the communities of Geelong and the Barwon South Western region in Victoria for over 150 years. GCFS works in partnership with local, state and federal governments, other service providers and stakeholders to improve the safety, wellbeing and development of children and young people most at risk. GCFS provides a range of services to children, young people and families. These services include community strengthening programs, early intervention and intensive family support programs, foster care and residential care.

The project

This project aims to increase the capacity of existing early childhood programs to promote structured active play for young children from vulnerable families in the Colac and Geelong areas. The project will pilot and evaluate the PLAY program and Play in the Park programs in partnership with Leisure Networks, health promotion coordinators, Deakin University researchers and other project partners.



Children enjoying outdoor play. *Image courtesy of Glastonbury Child and Family Services.*

Introducing families to the great outdoors

The story

Families in the Geelong and Colac areas are hopping, skipping and jumping their way to better health thanks to the *PLAY* program developed by GCFS. The peer-based early childhood enrichment program trains parents to mentor other parents in their own homes on how to be more active and playful as a family. Recognising the need for gross motor skill development in small children, GCFS ensures that physical activity is included in each weekly session with the families.

Coordinator Beth Kershaw says, "Our parents may be very young, have drug and alcohol issues or may just need some extra help in coming up with ideas to be more active with their children. By using other parents to model the activities it helps get families into a more positive cycle."

In addition to the weekly program delivered by the mentors, the *PLAY* program gives families ideas for active outdoor activities, tips on literacy development, good nutrition and safe holiday ideas.

More information about Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) is available on the VicHealth website at: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/picsar

"We now understand that people from lower socio-economic areas are more likely to lead sedentary lives and have accompanying health problems. Through this program we see the barriers to physical activities. These include lack of suitable play space in back yards, limited neighbourhood facilities and a lack of knowledge of how to provide simple active play at home using recycled materials. There may also be a lack of understanding of the importance of active play," adds Beth Kershaw.

GCFS recruits parents through its client base and offers them traineeships to become the *PLAY* mentors and to deliver the program activities. In some cases, becoming a mentor is the first employment opportunity experienced by parents. The project offers participants valuable qualifications, work experience and references.

Upon commencement of the *PLAY* program, families receive a start-up kit containing resources such as paints, chalk and information on how to reduce screen time. The kit also contains ideas on increasing communication within the family and on helping children with their reading. Suggestions are provided for affordable active places to go such as parks and leisure centres. Fun equipment for active play such as a skipping rope, a hacky sack and a hula hoop are also supplied in each kit.

The mentors demonstrate to the parent/carer the use of recyclable materials to create games such as skittles with plastic bottles and how to make a kite and fly it in a local park. Active play ideas include drawing footprints on paving with chalk and then hopping, skipping or jumping along the foot prints. Other ideas include, walking together and collecting interesting treasures from nature to later use in crafts or playing traditional active games such as the *Hokey Pokey* or *Ring a Ring a Rosie*.

"Many families in the community don't spend significant time in the outdoors. We are trying to break the cycle of inactivity in modern families. Mentors highlight the many options that are inexpensive and beneficial to families' physical and mental health," Beth Kershaw says.

Over 200 families per year in the Geelong, Winchelsea and Colac areas are benefiting from the project. A Deakin University pre and post study of a sample of children involved in the project has had promising findings. Initial results showed that all children tested initially had a significant delay in gross motor skills. However, after a 22-week involvement in the *PLAY* program, using the program activities, their skills had reached standard milestones.

Parents are also reporting to GCFS with positive observations. Comments received include: "*Wonderful program for me to get to know my son*"; and "*Glastonbury Play gives us information on how and why it is important to play*".

Beth Kershaw says receiving funding from VicHealth to run this program has been a valuable experience for the organisation and for the families.

"A key goal of the *PLAY* program is to enhance the relationship between parents and children, as this primary relationship is fundamental to a child's future development.

Our involvement with VicHealth has increased our emphasis on outdoor activities throughout our program and enabled whole families to participate in fun physical activities together."

For more information on Glastonbury Child and Family Services go to:
www.glastonbury.org.au
Telephone: (03) 5222 6911

PICSAR

Sport and active recreation organisations are well placed to assist VicHealth in addressing the health inequalities that result in poorer health outcomes for many groups in the community.

They have a tradition of providing opportunities for individuals and groups to:

- participate in physical activity,
- connect with other members of the community,
- feel part of their local community, and
- develop knowledge and skills that can be used in a range of contexts.

The Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) Program comprises three funding programs:

- State and Regional Grants
- Active Participation Grants
- Active Club Grants

The first two programs are long-term investments that work with State Sporting Associations, Regional Sports Assemblies, statewide peak agencies and regional organisations to increase participation in physical activity in specific target populations.

A learning snapshot from the independent evaluation being conducted by Monash University/ARTD Consultants shows that:

1. partnerships are perceived as beneficial to program delivery
2. it is important that staff (paid or voluntary) have the required skills to implement activities
3. sports at all levels should consider adapting policies and activities to provide greater flexibility to promote inclusion.