Co-designed program helps First Nations families identify early childhood development delays quicker

Posted on:
20 December 2024

In WA, 3 local family support services have expanded an existing Connecting Communities for Kids early childhood intervention program, so Koongamia First Nations families with children 0 to 6 can get quicker access to allied health professionals.

The program, Maaraka Dabakarn, helps First Nations families connect to allied health professionals, so they can ask questions about their child's development and if any needs arise, they can get support and referrals quicker.

NDIS partner in the community Wanslea came up with the idea that involved Child and Parent Centre Swan Midvale Hub and Ngala, all well-established and trusted family support services in the area.

Now available once a term for First Nations families to attend at Child and Parent Centre Swan Midvale Hub, group spokesperson and NDIS Wanslea operations manager, Megan, said their joint co-designed Maaraka Dabakarn is already proving to be a success.

'More families are attending as we work to build trust with the community,' Megan said.

'We are seeing some really positive outcomes, ones that may not have been possible if we had not of changed the way we deliver the program, and it certainly wouldn't have been possible without Child and Parent Centre Swan Midvale Hub and Ngala sharing their local knowledge.'

Megan said Wanslea was keen to run the Maaraka Dabakarn program locally after seeing how successful the initial program was supporting families in other regions.

'We knew families were getting some really great outcomes, particularly ones from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and some from First Nations, but we wanted to see what else we could do to reach more First Nations families,' Megan said.

'Knowing Child and Parent Centre Swan and Ngala had built strong, trusted relationships with local First Nations families we reached out to them for help to design a more culturally fit program and their knowledge and connections helped to make this program a success.'

Megan said when they all met the knowledge shared was so valuable.

'We learnt the way the initial program was being delivered was too formal,' she said.

'We learnt the flyer design and the language used could stop First Nations families from attending. Words like 'therapists' could scare them.

'Other barriers were transport; families might not be able to get to the program. The online registration was another, it could be overwhelming, so families may not register.'

Able to identify several potential attendance barriers, the group held workshops and co-designed ways to overcome the barriers.

‘We put a stop to lengthy presentations. We decided to include culturally appropriate visuals instead, like posters and graphics, and we shifted the focus to make the program more about connecting over food and play to help parents feel more comfortable sharing any concerns,’ Megan said.

‘We also knew the Child and Parent Centre Swan ran an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander playgroup for children aged 0 to 4 in partnership with Ngala. As a group, we decided it would be best to run the Maaraka Dabakarn program there straight after.

‘Families were already there; it was a culturally safe place where they already felt comfortable and Ngala said it would share the information with families to support program attendance.’

Megan said working with Child and Parent Centre Swan and Ngala was such a wonderful experience for Wanslea.

‘It’s helped to strengthen community relationships,’ she said. ‘Our work here just illustrates how important it is to collaborate and knowledge share, particularly when we look at designing programs that aim to support First Nations families.

‘The Maaraka Dabakarn program wouldn’t have been a success without the collective vision each organisation had for supporting children and families and the incredible skills the Child and Parent Centre Swan and Ngala brought to the table,’ Megan added.

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