



Family of friends

Margie Nolan, centre leader at Tagari-Lia Child and Family Centre in Bridgewater.

A transformative initiative that provides a safe and cosy learning environment for families in our most disadvantaged areas is winning recognition around the nation

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Simple parenting tips shared over an instant coffee can make the world of difference to a young mum's life. Just ask Wendy Mason, a 29-year-old single mother of three from Burnie who has only just learnt the value of spending one-on-one time with her children. Five years ago she was a frazzled and anxious mother at her wits end, with a daughter she couldn't control – a "bee in a bottle", according to staff at the Burnie Child and Family Centre.

Today, Wendy is calmer and more patient – and more aware of her children's needs. "Wendy grew up in quite a toxic environment with lots of yelling and screaming and she was determined to do better and to make a change," explains centre leader Fran Owens. "We worked with her rather than coming in as the experts and telling her what to do."

Wendy is just one of hundreds of parents being helped every day by passionate staff in Tasmania's 12 government-funded Child and Family Centres, facilities designed to improve the poor

educational outcomes for children who come from the state's lowest socio-economic areas. Children from such areas are at a much greater risk of not achieving their educational potential. Early intervention is considered critical to set them up for a lifetime of positive learning. More than half of Tasmania's kids aged under four live in low socio-economic areas.

The 12 centres are nestled in our most disadvantaged communities – in Bridgewater, Chigwell, Clarence Plains, Derwent Valley and Geeveston in the south; and in Beaconsfield, Burnie,



Ray Horton, 38, with partner Theresa Hillier, 33, and children Kodie, 4, and Kyle, 2, all of Gagebrook, at Tagari-Lia Centre in Bridgewater.

East Devonport, George Town, Queenstown, Ravenswood and St Helens in the north.

Many of the parents who walk through the centres' doors are juggling issues like mental health, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence and unemployment. Others are just lonely, or looking for social opportunities for themselves and their kids. Staff help the families in lots of ways. And all 12 centres operate differently because they respond to the unique needs of the communities they are in. Some have large indigenous populations, other centres host newly arrived families from some of the most troubled countries on earth, while others service fifth-generation Tasmanians desperate to break the cycle of poverty they've been born into.

For the parents who drop in to these cosy havens, they are a home away from home – a safe place where they are not judged or ridiculed when they ask for help, but welcomed with open arms. Mums and dads and sometimes aunts and uncles and grandparents from all sorts of backgrounds walk in to a friendly smile and a listening ear. The couches are comfy, the kettle is always on, and the people who work there are passionate about helping them be the best carers possible.

Fran Owens runs the Burnie centre: "Our centres are warm. They are designed to be like a lovely home. We are aiming to create not an institution but a lovely, pleasant house. So we don't have lots of signs up with lots of rules and regulations, which helps our parents feel like they belong. We want to show our parents that we can have fun with the kids but still have organised spaces and systems. So they can come from a totally dysfunctional place to an organised and warm space."

The mums and dads of these 12 centres don't drop-and-go like at a traditional day care service, but instead stay and learn how to teach their children through play, how to cook meals that will help them thrive, and how to bring up happy and healthy kids. Bridgewater Child and Family Centre leader Margie Nolan says developing bonds between kids and their parents is key. "If we can help foster stronger bonds between the parents and those young children, it really helps the children learn better," she says. "If they haven't experienced the right kind of learning in the right kind of environment then they are more likely to struggle when they get to school. They are more likely to be behind from the get go, and never really catch up. A child's most crucial learning happens in the first 1000 days – that's when the brain is most rapidly developing."

Nolan says sometimes it's an impossible task for struggling parents in these communities to focus on positive learning outcomes for their children, because their heads are so full with other troubles. "Some of our Tasmanian families cannot afford to have electricity or running water," Nolan says. "The families huddle together in the lounge room at night to try and keep each other warm. It's difficult to understand if you're not going through it yourself. I see it every day but I still can't really understand how difficult it is for a young mother who is surrounded by violence in her own home, who has an empty purse and can't af-

ford to buy food for her children or pay for a medical script, who doesn't even have a phone to connect with someone. When you are dealing with those sorts of challenges, it is extremely difficult to take the time to invest in your children's early years of learning. But it's so important because children learn more in the years before they start school than they do for the rest of their life. It's a lot easier to build a strong child than it is to repair a broken adult."

The challenges these parents face can be overwhelming but with support from centre staff they trust, they can also overcome hurdles they never thought possible through new connections with professionals they sometimes didn't even know existed. Children can be referred to free speech therapists and paediatricians and doctors who visit the centres in a kind of one-stop-shop.

Solo parent Chantelle Pate says attending the Derwent Valley Child and Family Centre for the past three years has helped her identify a speech delay in her three-year-old son Chayse, which was manifesting in wild tantrums. "I didn't realise but the ladies realised he was a bit behind in his speech," Pate says. "He was playing up because he couldn't communicate what he was feeling." The centre organised free speech therapy sessions and occupational therapy for Chayse, who is now communicating well and happily interacting with other children. Attending regular parenting classes also helped Pate improve her confidence and taught her how to better handle those pear-shaped days when everything goes wrong. "They taught me how to breathe, which really helps," she says. "I didn't really think to do that before and it just gives you the time to think before you react."

For some parents in isolated communities, dropping into the centre provides their only connection with other families.



Belinda Sergovia, 25, of Bridgewater at Tagari-Lia Centre in Bridgewater with her daughter Charlotte, 21 months.

"These places have such a drastic impact on really tricky families with lots and lots of struggles in life," Derwent Valley centre leader Katie Beamish says. She says her staff often don't wait for families to come to them, but instead find ways to connect with them and encourage them into the centre so they can be helped. "Our antenna is out all day," Beamish says. "Most of our energy goes into working with the parents because you can't improve outcomes for kids without improving the parents first. Our parents can be really needy and often come from challenging and unpleasant backgrounds. They need someone in their life to help them keep going, and we are there for them. We are like a hit of dopamine, we give them a good feeling hit."

Chigwell centre leader M'Lynda Stubbs says a big part of the success is that parents make connections with other parents, who then support each other. "It's powerful stuff," Stubbs says. "We all have a role in bringing up children. The parents' sense of togetherness makes that a lot more achievable."

Sue Horton works at the East Devonport Child and Family Centre. She says success stories look very different when you are dealing with parents perched on the cusp of crisis. "Success comes in all shapes and forms and you can't measure that in



Wendy Mason reads to her children Harley Webster, 3 and Riley Webster, 5, at the Burnie Child and Family Centre.

data or numbers," Horton says. "It's our job to listen and listen deeply and work out how we can best support them. We need to check in on them afterwards because it's not just about ticking a box and moving on but seeing how they are going. It's about seeing if what we've suggested for them has actually helped them."

For the workers in these centres, success could be as simple as when an anxious mother finds the courage to walk through the doors with her children for the first time. It can be a dad who has been struggling with substance abuse just sitting on the floor and solving a puzzle with his daughter. Success is the dad who now feels confident enough to take his kids out on his own. And it's the calendar on the fridge with a scrawled red circle around Thursday because Thursday is Games Day, and the single dad who made that mark will move hell or high water to make sure his little boy doesn't miss out on it because it's all he's been talking about for the past week.

Success can also be in the little things like hearing a parent talk about why leaves fall from a tree, or seeing a child count as they walk up the stairs, or watching a family cook together.

But mostly the success of Tasmania's Child and Family Centres is in the huge number of parents who come back week after week to participate in the powerful programs they offer. One kindergarten teacher with 20 years experience says she can pick a child who has participated in the program a mile away. In Bridgewater, Margie Nolan says her centre is now so valued in the community that vandals never touch it, despite nearby buildings being regular targets.

Success can also be on a grander scale too. Renowned children's author Mem Fox has visited the Burnie centre three times. She knows many of the families by name and checks in on their learning journey. Last month, the Queensland Education Minister brought a delegation to visit the Chigwell and Clarence Plains centre – just the latest indication of the recognition the Child and Family Centres program is winning around the nation.

Child and Family Centre Network Manager Jenny Cowling oversees all 12 centres. She says the Tasmanian government plans to build six new early learning hubs because of the success of the program. "They will be the next stage of Child and Family Centres but they might look a little bit different," Cowling says. "Nothing will be lost. They will be even better than what we have now."

Back in Burnie, mother of three Wendy Mason no longer feels she has to escape the house every day because she can't control her own children. A perfect morning for her, is one spent reading to her boys Riley, 5, and Harley, 3 – and later watching them solve a puzzle on the floor together without squabbling. She's been busy putting in the hard yards and now her young boys are much better behaved as a result. She's also learnt to believe in herself and to listen to their needs. "It's helped build me up instead of pushing me down," Wendy says. "The children can read books and sing and ride bikes because of this place. They are much more confident, and so am I."

Guiding hand for pregnant teens



TRIAL: Brave Foundation chief Bernadette Black, left, and Brave director Ebony Curtis with her son Archer, 3, at tagari lia Child and Family Centre.

Picture: NIKKI DAVIS-JONES

JACK PAYNTER

AS an expecting teenage mum all Bernadette Black wanted was for people to smile at her.

Instead her dad went into the middle of the street and yelled to the whole suburb that a teenage girl had sex and was now pregnant. After giving birth at 16 and being unable to find the parental support she wanted, it spurred a lifetime of helping other young women in the same situation.

Yesterday, 12 years after she created the Brave Foundation and 25 years after the birth of her son, she launched a nationwide mentoring program for 350 teen mums after securing a \$4 million federal government grant.

The Department of Social

Services funding will enable the Tasmanian-based not-for-profit to roll out its Support Expecting and Parenting Teens national trial.

Each mentor will support 25 teenage parents from pregnancy through to their child's first birthday. One mentor will be stationed in the Hobart area with nine others in Darwin, Brisbane, Newcastle and Wyong in NSW, Melbourne and Geelong.

"It's like the Brave mentor is a navigator and figuratively holds the expecting and parenting teen's hand to connect them with life and patient support so they can have the outcome that any other woman has in Australia, and so can their child," Ms Black said.

Teenage pregnancy rates

have generally been declining across the country. An Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report shows 15.4 women per 1000 aged 15 to 19 in Tasmania gave birth in 2015.

Third-year law student Ebony Curtis, 22, who is expecting her third child, said only one person congratulated her when she fell pregnant at 15.

"Looking back it's really quite shocking because I was going to become a mum too, I have just as much right as anyone else to enjoy being a mum," she said.

Ms Curtis said it would be life-changing for teenage mums to be involved in the mentoring program and "assist them to meet the goals they had for themselves before they fell pregnant".