



# Young Mums Growing Strong

Thanks to our generous supporters Mary Ward International Australia has been able to fund the highly successful early intervention initiative, the Strong Young Mum's Program, from 2008. The program, under the guidance of Loreto Sister and Centacare Wilcannia-Forbes Director, Margaret Mary Flynn, was established in Bourke at the end of 2005 in response to the large number of teenage mothers in the community who had dropped out of school. The program continues to grow and has brought about positive outcomes for almost 50 young mothers and their children. Below are a few examples of just how this program has made a real difference.

## About the Program

Forty per cent of babies born in Bourke are to women under the age of 25. Most have disengaged with the education system at a year eight or nine level as a result of falling pregnant, and by the time they are 20, many have more than one child.

The Strong Young Mums program was created by Centacare in response to this alarmingly high number of teenage pregnancies, aiming to provide opportunities for young women to receive accredited training and learn positive parenting skills. Loreto Sister and Centacare Director, Sr Margaret Flynn, said they had been concerned about this group of young women for a number of years, and eventually were able to attract funding to develop a program which would lead to them attaining the equivalent of Year 10 accreditation. As Director, Margaret was involved in identifying the need for the program in response to the social issues in Bourke. Along with her enthusiastic and committed team, she developed a model for the program and commenced the long process of seeking funding to commence the program.

The Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs were convinced it was an 'exemplary' program and provided part-funding however this was not enough to continue the program. Thanks to our generous supporters, Strong Young Mums is also part-funded by Mary Ward International Australia (MWIA) and the Loreto Toorak Past Pupils Association have also pledged their support for this program.

Weekly activities within the program include TAFE training, play groups, guest speaker sessions and home visiting. At the heart of all this is two dedicated family workers who meet regularly with the women on an individual basis, make sure they women are prepared for their TAFE classes, help arrange childcare, provide transport and accompany the women to appointments with other services around the town if needed.

## Recent outcomes and progress

The outcomes for the women have been as varied as the women themselves – many have finished modules in hospitality, computer skills and fashion design, others have finished parenting courses, used early childhood, health and support services for the first time, became mentors in their community, found jobs, moved to regional centres for further education, or left violent relationships.

In the last three months members of the MWIA funded Strong Young Mums Program in Bourke have made significant progress in their personal lives as women and mothers.

They have demonstrated autonomy and responsibility by being punctual at TAFE classes (previously they were collected by the family worker) and are also showing increased self esteem and confidence. The women are continuing to participate in playgroups and health information sessions. Topics have included: health checks for children, drug and alcohol and its effects on families, budgeting and well-being for mums.

Participants are becoming more aware of the needs of their children and putting them before their own needs. **Kelly\***, a young single mother who has few opportunities to go out socially, wanted to go to her friend's birthday party. Kelly left her son with her mother, who had consumed alcohol that day, and was likely to have more drinks while minding the baby. Kelly went to the party but was so worried about the wellbeing of her son that she went back to her mother's house and took him home, thereby missing out on the party.

The women have also enrolled in a TAFE course called Jobstart that aims to build confidence for job interviews and within work situations. Participants are improving their IT skills, developing planning and research skills and are learning how to prepare job applications. One participant, **Sandra\***, has already applied for a job at a local aged care facility after taking the course. Sandra said she would not have considered herself able to do this before completing the course. It has increased her confidence by teaching her practical skills and improving her understanding of what employers expect.

Some participants completed their Responsible Service of Alcohol Certificates in March. This has opened up opportunities for employment, and some participants are now exploring work in the hospitality sector. One participant, **Tanya\***, commented on the difference having a qualification has made in terms of how she sees herself. Tanya is proud of her achievement and the fact that she has completed a course and has something of value to show for it.

*\*Names changed to protect identities*

Research shows that young mothers in the program:

- are appreciating education and learning
- have become stronger and clearer about quality of life they want for themselves and children
- have improved parenting skills and knowledge of children's developmental needs
- have developed a strong support network
- are better informed of services and more confident in approaching them
- are taking action to end violence in their relationships
- are developing a sense of hope for their future .

Their children are:

- developing social skills
- exposed to early learning opportunities
- receiving improved parenting
- learning the routine of regular attendance, which has the potential to see them attending pre-school, and primary school on a regular basis.



Margaret says, "The *Strong Young Mums* Program has the potential to create systemic change and to break the generational cycle of poor health, poor educational achievement and family violence in Aboriginal communities and our aim is to continue to extend this program to more communities within western NSW".

In 2008, Strong Young Mums was operating in Lake Cargelligo and Narromine as well as in Bourke. In 2009, Centacare hopes to extend the program to new locations in NSW including Cowra and Brewarrina. With your continued support, we can make sure this successful program expands to reach many more young mothers.

**When you support MWIA you join a global network of like minded individuals, families, groups and businesses, who value social justice, health access and education for all. Join us and make a difference. Visit [www.loreto.org.au](http://www.loreto.org.au)**

