

Reaching out to disadvantaged families: Bernie on Wheels—a successful model in rural Tasmania

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The project *Bernie on Wheels* was created with the intention of:

- improving community knowledge within the Burnie municipality highlighting the child's early years as being of high level importance
- increasing the accessibility of resources and knowledge to parents and carers of children in 0–5 age group
- increasing participation levels at playgroup and other early years activities
- reaching out to those families considered “hard to engage”.¹

The authors share the role of project officer for *Bernie on Wheels*. *Bernie on Wheels* is a marketing project linking families with small children to the information and activities they may be seeking. It is a “street” project. It is a project with no walls. It is not an early childhood program, but does offer play opportunities to make it easier for parents to stop and access information. Through talking and listening to people, we have been able to inform people about all the wonderful programs on offer in Burnie for children aged 0–5. Parents are unable to access programs if they do not know they exist. Sometimes they do not even know the questions to ask. Sometimes this project is about leading someone gently by the hand. It is a project that is available to all families and carers who are associated with parenting children aged 0–5 years within Burnie. To offer this service effectively, we have needed to remain vigilant in regard to our knowledge of early childhood trends and research, and we have needed to remain connected to all local early childhood programs and their personnel.

Bernie on Wheels and Supported Playgroup is a “one stop” information outreach service and mobile playgroup. This project is subcontracted by the Burnie City Council as a “Communities for Children” project (Department of Families, Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) and facilitated by Centacare Burnie. The Playgroup activities are provided by Playgroup Tasmania. *Bernie* is the “tongue-in-cheek” name of the blue tongue lizard icon which was adopted by Centacare for use by all the Community Partners funded by “Communities for Children” in Burnie. These Community Partners include:

- *Lets Read*—a Literacy program for children 0–5, which promotes parent/child interaction
- *HIPPY (Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters)*—a structured “in-home” program for parents and children 0–5
- *Lucky*—task focused and workshop driven, central hub for teenage parents, their partners and children
- *Eat Right, Grow Bright*—this program promotes a variety of activities based on healthy eating and an active lifestyle
- *Community Events*—A range of local events held in specific neighbourhoods. Activities aimed at 0–5 age group.

Burnie is a beautiful rural “city”. Unfortunately, the people of the North West coast of Tasmania, and in particular Burnie, have some of the worst health outcomes, the lowest incomes and the poorest literacy rates when compared with the rest of Tasmania and Australia.² According to the recently released Social Inclusion Policy for comment in Tasmania, over 50% of adult Tasmanians can only read at the level of age 12 or less.² According to the Australian Early Development Index, 19.1% of Burnie’s 0–5 year olds are considered vulnerable on one or more developmental domains, with one suburb recording 23% of its very young children as being vulnerable. To put this in perspective, only 3.8% of the 0–5 year olds living in a wealthy suburb in Melbourne (Brighton) are considered vulnerable on one or more domains.³ Burnie has a population of almost 19,000, with approximately 1,800 aged 0–5 years. 7% of Burnie’s 0–5 children are of Aboriginal descent and 1% speak a language other than English at home.⁴ There has been a recent increase in births which currently sits at 16 per 1,000 people (up from 12.5),⁵ with 7% of mothers aged 19 and under.⁶

It is well documented that low educational status is linked to low income employment and unemployment, with strong links between children living in a low socio-economic households having poorer health outcomes.^{7,8,9} Being the child of a teen parent compounds these poorer health outcomes.^{10,11} Whilst not wishing to diminish the importance of spending money on services such as correctional services, mental health and rehabilitation, it is well documented that public money spent on programs supporting the early years, preventing these problems, is far more beneficial to society as a whole.^{12,13,14} It is commendable that Burnie was chosen as a “Communities for Children” site—without this funding, *Bernie on Wheels* and other recent local initiatives would never have occurred.

The *Bernie on Wheels* van with its colourful paintwork, is its own poster board. Some of the specific education and support services carried include information pamphlets (on play activities, visiting performances, health issues and education programs), the *Burnie Parent Pack*, magnetic phone lists and cards highlighting the web-site.¹⁵ We provide one-on-one conversations regarding parenting, health, child safety and referrals to appropriate agencies.

The van is regularly parked outside an empty shop in a “down at heel” arcade in which there are several empty shops. This walk through area is a popular meeting place for young parents and the socially disadvantaged—they seem to congregate sitting on the steps of the empty shops to chat and smoke. Their small children often play on the road mat or in the small reading tent provided by *Bernie on Wheels*. It seems that Burnie needs a family-friendly meeting spot for young families which provides shelter but without the pressure to buy food or drink. After 18 months of parking regularly in this spot, we have become “regulars”. The Burnie City Council has its own positive marketing image, and being employees has been a contributing factor to our “acceptance” as this connection implies the provision of information without “strings attached”

Bernie on Wheels also visits a variety of community events and early childhood activities based in the library, playgyms, playgroups and school-based programs. When the van partners with Playgroup Tasmania, an amazing play experience and networking opportunity is created—these special events are called *Bernie’s Playspots* and are well-known now after 18 months of operation. *Bernie’s Playspots* are more fun and successful outdoors on sunny days either in a park or beside the beach than during winter, when, by necessity, they happen in community or school halls.

Over the past 2 years, we have:

- handed out more than 4,000 brochures (mostly marketing play activities and special events)
- attended over 100 community events
- distributed approximately 400 Burnie Parent Packs

- provided 16 *Bernie's Playspots*
- engaged with more than 4,000 community members including having had over 200 “quality” conversations with parents or carers of small children whom are considered “hard to engage”.

After 2 years, the lines have been blurred, with some parents who were previously considered “hard to engage”, no longer truly fitting this category as they have become familiar to us as people with names. They still have the same problems, but they are “connected”.

Bernie on Wheels has partnered with others involved in the 0–5 community to outreach to families as comprehensively as possible. Some examples of community engagement and “word of mouth” communication associated with the project include:

- *Centacare*
 - The *Bernie* icon implies a commitment to the well-being of the young children living in our community.
 - *Bernie* the character in the suit. He is cheeky and fun and strongly identified with the icon. He has appeared regularly at early childhood events over the past 18 months. When he appeared at a recent *Bernie's Playspot* the children just left what they were doing to interact with him - he could be likened to the “Pied Piper of Burnie”
 - *Bernie's Passports*—these were offered twice by *Centacare* during 2008. One passport involved parents collecting stamps from 3 early childhood activities and then being given a plush toy *Bernie* and a book titled *Bernie the Blue Tongue finds a home*. The second passport involved attending at least 2 early childhood activities and then collecting free tickets to attend the *Hooley Dooleys* concert.
- *Playgroup Tasmania*
 - *Bernie's Playspots*—provide fun activities in partnership with *Bernie on Wheels*
 - One playgroup parent has commented—“those darn passports sure encouraged families to come to playgroup”. She said that 4 families just turned up to get their passport stamps, but then kept returning weekly because they enjoyed the playgroup experience so much. She feels that the links forged between *Bernie on Wheels* and *Playgroup Tasmania* has invigorated the organisation and increased membership numbers
 - During 2008 several young parents told us that they would never take their children to playgroup because they could never trust another adult with their children. They were genuinely surprised to discover that Playgroup was about staying and playing with one’s own child in a communal child friendly space.
- *HIPPY*
 - This program had difficulties initially because it appeared to conflict with many school based early childhood programs. The schools were struggling for numbers and considered HIPPY a threat.
 - The project officer regularly attended downtown with *Bernie on Wheels*, visited Child Health Workshops and gradually broke down the barriers within the schools and the health community.

- It is now one of the most successful, easily accessible early childhood programs on offer on the North West coast of Tasmania. It is sought out at all levels of society and is currently being established in other communities.
- *Lets Read*
 - This school-based project has worked closely with *Bernie on Wheels* for the past 2 years. A major trigger for success was an offer from the Tasmanian Government to supply books to every child under the age of 5 by utilising the established *Lets Read* project.
 - *Bernie on Wheels* was particularly well-funded, so it was negotiated that weekly prizes be offered to those who collected their bags of books either from the van, a playgroup, the library or from Child Health. These prizes included book and toy vouchers, family meals in local restaurants and family passes to the Burnie Show. The major prize draw was a family trip for 4 to the Melbourne Zoo for the day.
 - These prizes caused a lot of excitement and later during 2008, the *Lets Read* project officer was congratulated on her ability to reach so many families, so quickly and, in particular, being able to reach those considered “hard-to-engage”. The prizes also opened up conversations with families who came to the van for their books—they were talking about us out in the suburbs! This meant that we could highlight all the free early childhood programs on offer in the schools and at the local library. It was noted that many families had been avoiding the school programs because they felt uncomfortable about taking their small children to school earlier than was considered necessary, because they had had such bad experiences themselves at school. Some parents simply did not know that schools offered early childhood programs. They also did not know that these programs were offered either free or at very low cost. These conversations truly linked people to programs and one coordinator of a now-flourishing local school playgroup feels that her playgroup has been “discovered” as a result of *Bernie on Wheels*.
- *The Burnie Library*
 - “Story-time” and “Rock’n’Rhyme” are two programs offered by the Children’s librarian for 0–5s.
 - It has been noted that during 2008, the Burnie library has had the highest number of new enrolments of any library within Tasmania. The Children’s librarian has also noticed that there are now groups of people who attend the children’s sessions who would never have set foot inside a library in previous years. In particular, a group of newly arrived non-English speaking residents, took their small children along to “Story-time” so that they could learn to read and understand English with their children. One of these women had spoken to us at the van late in 2007.
 - One special incident occurred when the mother of a very active 2 year old had just attended “Story-time”. She relayed her discomfort to us about her child’s very active behaviour during the session, but we told her that the Children’s Librarian did not mind this and that this was perfectly acceptable behaviour for a 2 year old. Apparently this mother has not missed a session since and has brought more of friends into the library—a group who were previously strangers to the library.

- *The Aboriginal community*
 - *Bernie on Wheels* has been able to make links within the Aboriginal community because of established pathways through Child Health. In particular, one Elder had noted that the distribution of the *Lets Read* books that had not reached their 0–5s. In response to this, we were able to create some more prizes for distribution of these *Lets Read* books via the Child Health Nurse who attends the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre once a week.
 - *Bernie's Playspot* was invited by the Indigenous Early Childhood project officer to attend a family day in Burnie Park during January, 2009. There are now plans to set up an Indigenous Playgroup on site at Playgroup Tasmania as this provides access to early childhood resources. It is believed that the distribution method of the *Lets Read* books created a “soft” trigger for this liaison.
- *Other 0–5 assets in Burnie* include Australian Breastfeeding Association, Family Day Care, Child Care, Child Health, Burnie Community House, Paediatric Drop-in Clinics, private playgroups, playgyms, swimming, music, dance, gymnastics and martial arts classes...there are a plethora of services and activities on offer.

But

If all these wonderful programs are not being utilised—being linked with the people and families who would benefit most from them—then all the funding in the world will not make a difference to the health and educational outcomes of the people and families of Burnie....or anywhere for that matter.

Why is *Bernie on Wheels* different? And what is working? It is really a collection of many different things, but in particular it is because we are out and about within the community being seen and connecting with people. The activities that are special include:

- The bold *Bernie* icon which is seen almost daily in the community. This includes the character in the *Bernie* suit and the paintwork on the sides of the van. This icon is also “branded” on balloons, stickers and size 4 T-shirts which are given out to children for a variety of reasons, and on pens and cards given to adults.
- Having enough money to provide prizes that were not only meaningful for the 0–5 age group, but created excitement, fun and hope as mentioned in the *Lets Read* project. During 2007 I was also given 10 family passes to the Burnie Show by a prominent local figure. These were used as prizes for a children’s art competition which was then displayed in some of the empty shop windows. Family members still approach us to say that it was a real treat to have taken their children to the Burnie Show.
- *The Advocate* (local newspaper) has been used as a marketing tool to provide articles and media releases. This newspaper seems to be read by most locals and adds value to any marketing that *Bernie on Wheels* can offer.
- The web-site has been up and running now for 18 months. This has added another layer to the project and generally keeps service providers informed providing a meaningful link to all early childhood services, programs, child-friendly businesses—and their clients.
- The close networks that naturally exist in most regional and rural communities

- The *Burnie Parent Pack*—this is a compilation of all the services (into a folder) that could be of interest to any new parent in Burnie—whether as a new resident or as a parent with a newborn.

The success of the project, in reaching disadvantaged families, became evident towards the end of 2008. Some examples of this include:

- Two young fathers who were obviously from disadvantaged backgrounds separately approached the van saying that they had heard from friends that they could find out about play activities from the van. Both were looking for fun things to do with their pre-school children.
- At a community event three young mothers with low literacy skills asked for help to fill out some forms.
- Our names are used by young parents who regularly approach us when we are wearing our *Bernie* T-shirts—some of these young parents are strangers to us, so it seems that conversations have been occurring in regard to *Bernie on Wheels*.
- Other early childhood agencies in Tasmania have recognised that we are really reaching “hard to engage” families and some are now trying to use our contacts to make their own links. At this point, we feel very “protective” of our status as we feel that our links are very fragile and only exist on a “one-to-one” basis.

We propose that

- The *Bernie on Wheels* project continue in Burnie—this does not need to include the van, but the service must remain “universal” and “without walls”. This project could be extended to other municipalities with the employment of similar project officers. It is well recognised that early childhood programs benefit all children, but if these programs are not being sought out by those families considered “hard to engage” then positive change to social and health outcomes are unlikely. Officers out in the field do reach families, but it can take 2–5 years to develop trust and hence create strong bonds and links.
- Field project officers must be factored into any funded early childhood program.
- Family-friendly no-cost meeting places need to be preserved in all town planning activities.

It is time that we, as a society, took action—continue the research, but fund the early childhood programs that work. We must ensure that those who are currently excluded from society, those considered “hard to engage” do not continue to “fall through the cracks” and miss out on the available opportunities. Projects like *Bernie on Wheels* have the ability to link families to programs that work for them. We need conversations, we need to form friendships and sometimes we need to take each other by the hand and lead and be led to a better future. Only people can do this.

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Presenter

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