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#235 - The Check-up Before School (CUBS) program: a cross-sector approach to supporting early learning and development

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Objectives/aims

Australia has universal child health and development screening programs available from birth to school entry. However, there are significant issues relating to equitable access, with research demonstrating low levels of uptake in disadvantaged communities. The Check-Ups Before School (CUBS) project sought to redress current inequities within a disadvantaged urban community of NSW. A child and family health nurse, speech therapist and 'health linker' (social worker) were embedded within local early childhood education and care settings to conduct health and development screening, support family referral follow-up and service engagement, and work as a team with early educators to support children and families. The key aims of the research were to:

1. Explore community perceptions of the barriers and facilitators to participation in early childhood screening programs
2. Assess the role and impact of the CUBS program
3. Understand practitioner experiences of cross-sector collaboration in supporting school readiness.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the feasibility and impact of the CUBS pilot project. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with parents and carers (n=48), community service providers (n=3), and health and education



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professionals (n=10). Data from the child health records (n=24) of consenting families were examined to assess need and referral pathways.

Main findings

1. The barriers to participation in screening checks. Participating families identified four key reasons why families were reluctant to engage in child screening checks:
 - They felt health checks were only for sick children
 - They felt that already had enough to think about
 - They experienced the health care system as uncaring and inconsistent
 - They believed that immunisation was the priority in the early years, and development will happen in its own time.
2. The impact of CUBS.
 - 274 children were assessed and a total of 481 referrals were made (most to dentists and speech therapists).
 - Parent education on development was provided
 - Professional learning support was provided
 - Families reported high levels of satisfaction, and increased knowledge and confidence.
3. Cross-sector collaboration. Professionals described the experience as a “game changer and win-win” for the families. They described developing a different mindset for service delivery, and highly values information exchange.

As further evidence of the success of CUBS, the former NSW Minister for Education and Early Learning, Sarah Mitchell, credited the program with informing recent policy to implement 4-year-old health and development check-ups in pre-schools in NSW.