

LIMURRU

NEIGHBOURHOOD PARENT' & CHILDREN'S CENTRE

CO-ORDINATOR'S REPORT

Prepared by

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INTRODUCTION

This report is presented at the end of a 12 month period as Co-ordinator of Limurru and 9 months after it opened as a Neighbourhood Parent & Children's Centre. It is aimed to serve as an orientation and hand over paper for the new Co-ordinator, and to set the program as it exists now into some perspective of past and future directions.

BACKGROUND

Limurru closed as a Child Care Centre at Christmas time 1982, and officially began as a Neighbourhood Parent & Children's Centre in February, 1983, after the preparation and planning phase.

The development of Limurru as a Neighbourhood Centre for parents and children was a response to the changing needs of the local community, especially those living in the high rise flats. These flats now house a high proportion of non-working families with very low incomes, mainly from Social Security benefits. There is also a high ratio of female headed single parent families. Those families who are working have very low paid jobs.

Although there are many migrant families in the flats, especially Indo-Chinese people, these families seem to have reasonably good family and other support networks with regard to their parenting and child care needs. The highest area of need seems clearly to be amongst the Australian families experiencing the disadvantages of long term, perhaps 2nd or 3rd generation low income and all that goes with it.

The needs of migrant families must always be kept in mind however, and a welcome door kept open for them at Limurru. There are obviously many cultural reasons for Limurru not being extensively used by migrant families now it is a Neighbourhood Centre focusing mainly on the needs of parents who are not working.

Limurru, therefore, now focuses mainly on the needs of non-working parents, who require some regular part time child care, emergency care, and other supportive activities related to their personal and parenting needs, and the developmental and recreational needs of their children. It is an attempt to create a neighbourly support centre where parents and children can get a break or a change of environment away from the flats, where

people can give each other a whole range of neighbourly supports; where friendships can be developed; skills and information exchanged; self-esteem and confidence boosted, and the family networks and bonds respected and enhanced. Parents particularly appreciate the fact that Limurru is a house, close to, but still away from, the flats. There are some trees and a yard, and a bit of space. "It is the house we've never had," as it has been described.

Some other important features to note about Limurru are the principles of universal access with a special commitment to people with low incomes. Limurru is not a special 'welfare service' for 'poor people.' Although virtually all the parents do live on very low incomes, and this is often talked about and always taken into consideration, the parents do not see it as a special place for people who have problems or are poor or as a welfare service at all. Part of the philosophy is that all activities, outings, etc., are charged for at Limurru. The prices may be low but this is an important feature. We have also been very careful to avoid the welfare label in our relationships with other agencies. There is a policy at Limurru not to take welfare referrals with a supervisory or watch dog role with regard to families 'at risk.' We do make such families welcome and will offer appropriate support, but will not supervise them or report back to another agency.

There is a clearly positive focus at Limurru. The place is not problem oriented, but is working very much with the positive aspects of people's lives, skills and contributions.

Within the context of the general principles which have been outlined in the proposal for Limurru Neighbourhood Parent & Children's Centre, (November 24, 1982), the Centre's current location and the needs of the families within that community, the following objectives have been developed:

1. To provide a range of child care services including full and part-time day care, occasional care, emergency day care and linkages with other emergency over night or holiday care services for local families. To deliver these services in a manner which is in line with all other objectives.

2. To provide children with a variety of activities, opportunities and experiences with respect to the rights and freedoms of the individual child and which maximise the child's developmental potential and their parent's participation.
3. To foster and strengthen community networks, supports and linkages of families who use the Centre and foster co-operative endeavours among parents and others whereby they might share their parental responsibilities and care for their children collectively. A baby sitting club may be an example of such endeavour.
4. To support and enhance people's parenting self-esteem, confidence and skills with particular respect and care for the parent/child bond and other family bonds.
5. To develop the Centre as a focal point for skill and information exchange, mutual support and a venue for meetings, gatherings and activities relevant to the needs of the families using the Centre.
6. To develop, in conjunction with parents and children, a range of programs including those over and above child care, which reflect and facilitate mutual exchange and support and the strengthening of families generally.
7. To develop structures and mechanisms which enable and actively encourage the participation of parents in the Centre, enhance their role and contribution and their confidence and ability to manage the Centre collectively.
8. Generally, to create a Centre which has an open, welcoming atmosphere which breaks down the traditional barriers between parents and those providing services for them and their children. That is an atmosphere which gives people a sense of inclusion and belonging, thereby paving the way to participation and eventual collective parent management.

WHAT IT WAS LIKE IN THE BEGINNING

The task of the early days was to change the concept of Limurru in the minds of local people from a child care centre to a neighbourhood centre. This was not an easy task. People had been used to the child care centre, and also had no experience of the more vague idea of a neighbourhood centre.

It was hard for people to grasp just what it would be like and what its potential could be for the future.

The first phase could be described as the "establishment phase," where basic structures were established, along with notions of a neighbourhood centre for parents and children. Therefore, the earlier aims were:

- developing and getting across to people the concept of a Neighbourhood Parent & Children's Centre and what it could become;
- the creation of the atmosphere of a neighbourhood centre which was friendly, open and welcoming;
- establishing some early activities which people clearly wanted, and which would foster these early aims of the Centre;
- establishing the beginning of involvement and some sense of belonging for parents and children.

This meant that staff took virtually all responsibility in the early days - creating the setting while trying to canvas parents' opinions and involvement wherever possible. However, it was difficult enough to get parents to stay for a cup of coffee. We did a lot of outreach work; held parent Barbeques, family days, and open day, a street party, printed a pamphlet, etc. In these early days all food preparation for such activities was done by the staff. Those parents who attended came like guests, partook of the goodies and went home, with all the cleaning up again being done by the staff. This is a great contrast to now where parents take major or often complete responsibility for such activities.

When we did begin to get parents to stay for a cup of something, they basically sat again like guests in someone else's place and needed looking after. When the Urn was empty, someone would call to the staff, "The Urn's empty!" Again, great progress can be seen when we think of this. Nowadays, parents take full responsibility for such things as the Urn. They will hop up and do the dishes, wipe the table, etc., or sometimes sweep or mop the floor if it needs it. Most parents seem to have a sense of belonging and freely make suggestions for improving things about the place or about getting things the Centre needs. They use the terms "we" and "us" when speaking about Limurru.

It seems that the establishment phase has gone quite well. There is more work to be done in the area of outreach to let more local people know about Limurru. There is also important work to be done in the further involving of parents who are hovering somewhat on the periphery of things at Limurru. Care must be taken that people do not feel excluded and are given support to break into the centre of things if they want to.

PROGRESS IN THE MEETING OF OBJECTIVES

This is not meant to be a full scale evaluation, but rather some reflections on Limurru's progress based on my own observations and staff discussions. For ease of discussion here, I have grouped similar or related objectives together and will discuss them with the various activities and programs which have been developed to meet them. All objectives are of course interrelated and interdependent, and most activities are aimed at meeting more than one objective.

Group 1

Those objectives which are basically related to the development of a neighbourhood centre concept, participation, and the development of mutual support, co-operation and friendships. These are Objectives 3, 5, 7, and 8.

Activities and programs which have been developed to meet these objectives include the early efforts to create an open, welcoming atmosphere, e.g., reorganizing the kitchen with tables and chairs, the urn, etc.; establishing the 'grown-ups room,' and so on. Weekly parents morning tea get togethers, (now parents meetings), were started in the early days also, and a great deal of effort put into talking to parents at all times about the new Limurru. A lot of family Barbeques, outings, etc., were held in order to get parents to come along to spend some time finding out about the place and to meet one another.

By April, the Limurru pamphlet had been printed, (in 5 languages), and in early May, a very successful street party was held. Napier Street was blocked from Webb Street to the existing street blockade by the Council, and there were street stalls, lots of childrens games, and so on. This was an attempt to attract attention to Limurru from people in the flats so they might come and find out more about the place.

Large screen printed notices were made for the fence and even the roof, (which can be seen quite clearly from the Napier Street flats). A loud speaker was used in a fun way to let people know about what was going on at the party, and a large crowd came along. Special effort was made to talk to people who attended about Limurru, and to hand out pamphlets. Articles were also written in the local newspapers. Although the Centre is right opposite the flats, we can't assume that people will find out about it, and outreach remains an important issues.

By the time of the street party, parents were beginning to become more involved. Staff took major responsibility for the street party, but on the day we were able to get more parents working on the stalls, cooking, etc. The success of the party gave a great sense of community and belonging for the parents.

It was quite soon after the street party that parents suggested forming a parents committee. This was formed basically by those 5 parents who were most interested rather than by parent election as it is now. For the parents, the major impetus and meaning for the committee was around traditional ideas of parents committees such as fund raising. For Limurru though, it represents the first step in the long and slow process towards the goal of possible self-management. However, not a great emphasis is placed on this as it tends to be seen as a bit overwhelming at present. They are letting the idea grow on them as time goes by - fund raising provided a clear positive focus where clear measurable successes could be seen, and self-esteem and confidence built. However, it can also keep women in the traditional roles of women in 'Mothers Clubs' and deflect them from more responsible decision making roles. There is another aspect about too much emphasis on fund raising, and that relates to the issue of raising funds from the same low income people who need and use the Centre. For these reasons there has been a strong staff push to keep prices at street parties, fetes, and other fund raising endeavours at a level which is affordable by those with a low income. Care has been taken to talk about these issues with parents, and to keep them at the surface when making decisions. Structures have also been created wherever suitable, which help to prevent pressure being

put on people to buy tickets or whatever. For example, now that parents have begun a mini lotto draw each week, there is a 'rule' about how many tickets one person can buy; staff also use their own occasional rather than regular purchasing of a ticket as an alternative model. Efforts are made to talk about these buying pressures, and also the roles of women in these fund raising groups.

Gradually the parents have taken more responsibility, and participated in decision making at the Centre. The fund raising aspect of the committee seems to have taken its proper perspective. The committee needs to always have a clear picture of their role in relation to other Limurru parents, staff, and the BSL generally. At this stage, the committee members canvas parents' opinions and pass them on formally or informally. This will become a more difficult task, of course, as more parents become more involved in the Centre. The committee currently sees itself as an advisory body, helping to plan for Limurru, and to operate it on a day-to-day basis. The most important participatory issue is being able to have a say about how the place functions, certainly not to completely run it themselves or to control it.

A constitution has been developed by the committee, (with staff support), and the second committee formed by parent election in early October. It is seen at this stage as being important that the co-ordinator remains the staff representative on the committee to maintain the appropriate relationships with Limurru and the BSL. A parent from the committee, (chosen by them), is now on the staff selection panel, and this has proved to be very helpful. Quite a lot of staff effort needs to be put into the committee as it can be a difficult and stressful job for parents without enough support. However, they are developing more and more skills and confidence, and so will require less support as time goes on. At this stage, the meetings have been chaired by the staff representative, but parents are almost confident enough to take this on. The committee needs to remain rewarding for parents, and an 'important' job with appropriate recognition. They also need special treats, etc., now and again.

Two family camps have been run with two more planned for the Summer. These help greatly in parents sense of belonging and involvement with Limurru, their getting to know one another, and mutual support. They also help a lot in the meeting of objectives related to parenting skills, self-esteem, and family bonds. The Babysitting Club also meets a number of objectives and clearly helps in those related to parent involvement in the Centre and mutual co-operative endeavours. The parents see it as their club, the benefits are clear and immediate, and a sense of belonging is assisted. The parents who stay at Limurru to baby sit seem to have a great time as well as those who go out. After tea, children go to bed, parents are able to chat together in peace, play cards or whatever. This sharing of responsibility and the relatively peaceful time together helps to promote the sharing of experiences, and the development of friendships. The Babysitting Club still always has the staff support worker present, but parents are taking an increasing responsibility for planning the night's activities, (games, films, etc.), and for the actual baby sitting. The tendency to leave it to the staff member is there, and needs to be watched carefully. The Babysitting Club has also suffered a little from lack of structure and organization. It is difficult to find the right balance between letting the parents take responsibility for things, and giving them enough support and structure to make it workable and positive for them. A bit more effort is needed in the area of planning and organization for the Babysitting Club to run more smoothly.

Looking after each others children in the Babysitting Club, or generally around Limurru, and talking together about them also helps promote friendship and mutual support and co-operation. Getting to know and care about each others children is a bonding experience between the parents. These understandings and friendships are also fostered by the day-to-day activities of the place, such as cooking lunch together, going out on trips with children and staff, washing the dishes, helping with the child care, having cups of coffee together, and so on.

Most of the parents have very little opportunity for any extended peaceful time away from their children and the flats.

The need for time and space must be a basic human need. It is essential for any reflection and for growth, as well as basic maintenance of sanity.

Several 2-day 'holidays' away in the country, (with the Co-ordinator), have been organized for women, while their children are looked after at Limurru. The parents who have been on these trips had either never had such time away from their children or else it had been many, many years ago. These times away have been a time for relaxation, some spoiling, (bacon and eggs for breakfast - without children!), walks, fresh air, lots of talking and laughing, and the sharing of life experiences and ideas. They are bonding for the people, and the group, can help to include new people, and definitely foster co-operation and friendships. These holidays certainly mean hard work for the staff who remain at Limurru and stay overnight with the children, but they are of great benefit for the parents, and thereby for the children.

Considerable progress has been made in the meeting of this first group of objectives. There is a good, open, warm and friendly atmosphere about the place which is often commented upon by visitors. People are more aware of the potential of a neighbourhood centre and its range of benefits. Parents are actively participating in the daily happenings, but still less in the child care than in other things. They take some responsibility for the place, take a turn at cooking lunch, washing up, etc. Parents seem to feel they have a say, (and they do), about how the place runs and what programs should be undertaken. In contrast to the early days, family days, picnics, barbeques, celebrations such as farewells or birthdays, are now virtually totally initiated and run, (and cleared up), by parents. In early October, staff went away for a 2-day staff development session. During this time, parents took responsibility for keeping Limurru open for parents to care and spend time with their children. No child care was provided but parents cooked lunch together and generally had a good time. The place was well taken care of and left clean and tidy. Since then, parents have similarly kept Limurru open on Thursday afternoons while staff have their staff meeting in the other building.

The parents are often a great support to each other through small or larger difficulties. While in the early days they would always go to staff with these, the other parents around the kitchen table now provide major support. They understand each others life styles and types of tribulations so well, and are very direct and honest in their feed back to one another. Many individual friendships have also flourished giving people extended support. There is sometimes a problem with talking about people behind their backs or all ganging up on a particular person who is the current scape goat. Somewhat of a pecking order can be seen at times. These issues are talked about in parents meetings, and informally, and people agree that they cause hurt and damage, and should not go on. They make 'rules' about not talking about people behind their backs, etc., and for a time things will improve. However, it is a perennial problem. Positive and appropriate early intervention from staff is sometimes important to help prevent things developing too far in a negative sense. Assistance is also needed to help parents think about these issues, why they happen, and what can be done. It is also important to keep in mind the different values and modes of operation that people have. What appears to staff as a major blow-up heading for disaster can often be fought and talked out by parents to quite a fast and satisfactory resolution.

The danger of a central clique of involved parents becoming so strong as to frighten off or discourage and exclude peripheral parents or new ones is ever present. The parents have such strong personal needs which are in some important ways being met at Limurru; there is obviously an unconscious tendency to want to keep it for themselves; there are fears that to include more people would dilute what they are getting. This has been talked about, and efforts made to keep it up front and conscious. However, some central parents are understandably a bit defensive, and tend to deny the problem. It is not actually a major worry as yet; parents do make an effort to welcome and involve others, and will often take people under their wings. The parents committee has accepted a responsibility for welcoming new parents as part of their role. This helps to keep them aware; however, much staff attention is needed to be given to this area, and a lot of assistance given to the process of inclusion. More

attention needs to be given to peripheral parents, inviting them personally, and especially to activities, and helping them to integrate into the parent group. Consideration needs to be paid also to the central group, and how their needs can be met so they become more secure and able to share the benefits of Limurru. This process is underway, it seems, as parents are now gaining more confidence, and getting skills from outside Limurru, as well as from inside.

Group 2 - that is, those objectives to do with children's developmental needs and the strengthening of families. These are objectives 1, 2, and 6.

Most of the techniques and activities used in the meeting of these objectives are somewhat more straightforward. The major difficulty is to integrate the meeting of the children related objectives with the parent related ones. It is very easy for these to remain separate as they are in ordinary child care situations. This separation is also the past experience of both parents and staff, and is in fact, far easier to manage in a short term. So, although there is a commitment from staff to this integration, it remains difficult. However, it is essential for the future of Limurru and the overall meeting of the objectives.

Society has very strong entrenched values and ideas about the needs of children and the responsibilities of parents. These include strong values about working parents and child care; how children should be treated and raised; how much time parents should spend away from their children; food, clothing, discipline, and a myriad of other issues. These are especially strong in relation to child care when parents are not working. Why do non-working parents need child care? Should they have it, and if so, how much? All parents should be 'good' parents regardless of their age, background experience, or current life circumstances according to the pervasive social values on these issues.

These issues effect the way we work at Limurru. The parents and staff expectations can be quite divergent, and value clashes are inevitable, even if these are not out in the open. All this has its effect on the way children's programs are planned, and the integration of all the aspects of the Centre. The

staff do have considerable expertise and experience in the child care and children's programming field, and also want to offer the children a wide range of developmental opportunities. The parents, perhaps, feel that staff do know best about these things, and leave it up to them. However, too much of this means a negative effect on the meeting of other objectives. It is hard to find that balance between valuable staff input, and participation. There is a good awareness of these issues amongst the staff however, and they are certainly being tackled. Children's program planning is currently being done weekly on a Friday with all staff participating, and a somewhat more responsible role being taken by the qualified Kindergarten teacher. A theme such as "body awareness" or "helping each other" is chosen each week, and activities, outings, songs, games, etc., are planned to help develop this theme and the children's general developmental needs at the time. A lot of emphasis is placed on outings for the children, and wherever possible, these now include the parents. This emphasis is an attempt to maximise the children's opportunities and experiences. We are now attempting to plan outings which will be particularly attractive to the whole family in order to encourage more parent participation with their children.

The previously mentioned family camps are also very important for the strengthening of families, as well as the developmental opportunities for children. Families need time and space together, and particularly need to have fun together. As Limurru is used more as a neighbourhood centre, parents spend more time there with the opportunity, not only to relax and share with others, but also to watch their children at play. They can see their children relating to others, and the staff relating to the children. The children's positive attributes are often more obvious in this environment than in the hectic crowded home environment; this helps in parenting skill development and in family strengthening. The children obviously also benefit from having their parents around at Limurru. They can play and explore with the added security of knowing that Mum is close by. Children also benefit from having other parents to relate to, and seeing them relate to their children.

The policy regarding children's food at Limurru is also important for children's developmental needs. No sugar or chemicals are used in food preparation, and meals are carefully and nutritionally planned, cordials were replaced by fresh juice made in a juice extractor, and no flavouring is added to their milk. This policy was developed before Limurru opened as a Neighbourhood Centre, so people accepted it from the beginning. It was not made a big fuss of, and care has always been taken not to imply criticism of parents through this policy. Parents don't seem to feel any such criticism, and agree with the policy. It has had some effect on the children's diet at home as time has gone on. Slowly parents have talked about it, learned new cooking ideas, and changed some of their food habits. The children easily accept a variety of foods, and must benefit nutritionally. This policy has a number of other values related to parenting skills, self-esteem, confidence building, also. Parents feel very pleased with new cooking skills, and love to demonstrate them to others at Limurru. It looks like having a very positive long term effect on people's diet habits, and therefore health and general well being. It seems well worth preserving it now that it has come so far, and over the most difficult stage. This may mean stepping in from time to time and preventing the slackening off of the policy.

A Toy Library is being organized by staff and some parents, so children can borrow age appropriate books and toys. It will need a lot of staff support and input for a while, and also encouragement from all staff to get it going so both parents and children may experience its benefits. It is one of those things that parents quite often don't see the benefits so clearly as the staff, and the personal benefits for the parent are less than clear.

If parents have more than one child it is very difficult for them to spend time in a relaxed way with just one of their children. In response to this, the Paseo Club was started. It gained its name from our Spanish speaking staff member who takes responsibility for it. Paseo means outing in Spanish. This program is designed to provide an opportunity for parents to spend time with one of their children, and to have fun together. Outings are organized according to the parent and children's wishes, to such places as the pool, the Zoo, etc. The staff member takes one of the children from Limurru, (an

opportunity for some modelling), and parents take one of their children. This was quite popular at first, but then rather faded out. This seems to be partly due to lack of perseverance and input from the staff team. There is no clear or obvious benefits or personal recognition for parents whose personal needs for such are great. Therefore, more exciting things, where they do get more positive personal feedback are more popular. Perhaps it was also left too much up to the parents to decide on outings. In the early stages more responsibility in actually setting dates, times, and places should have been taken by staff until the program became more established. With such programs, ways in which the parents can have some of their personal needs met in the process, and gain recognition and positive feedback must be sought.

In recent evaluative discussions, the major issue surrounding the meeting of children related objectives was the integration of the parent and child oriented programs. It was decided to try to get parents more involved in the children's program planning, and to plan programs which are attractive to both children and parents. This would mean, not only outings, but daily activities around the Centre which parents may be happy to join in with. At present, parents tend to leave the child care up to the staff, even sometimes when the child is not booked in, (when child care is technically the parents' responsibility). However, they are beginning to come out of the kitchen more, and play on the swings or in the sand pit, etc., with the children.

It is seen as being important for the long term goal of possible parent management that parents eventually take considerably more responsibility for actual child care in a co-operative sense. This is important in financial terms as the program is such an expensive one, and must eventually need a smaller staff team. Getting parents involved in child care is a major goal for the next phase of Limurru's development. Attempts such as a roster system during sewing or other parent activities have not worked so far. This has been due to the fact that parents do not feel comfortable, as yet, when taking up a quasi staff position. They don't know clearly where things are; what the routine is, and what is expected of them. In their eyes,

child care has never given them any positive recognition as a person. Nor do they have any experience in looking after groups of children or doing organized play and activities with them. The staff team has not given quite the right attention and support to people when they 'work' in child care, and parents seem to have not felt very useful or needed. Parents have tended to gravitate to the kitchen where they feel familiar and safe.

This is an example of where things can seem much easier and simpler than they really are, and the developmental skills needed in such work with the parents underestimated. When such attempts fail, it is sometimes easy to blame the parents for not really wanting to work and for not trying, etc. Such things as working in child care need to be made special and important, and parents need to feel useful and needed. Expectations need to be clear, (time, etc.); major staff support given in the early stages, and the experience made to be a very positive one. Clear positive feedback is needed to follow up. All this is, of course, time consuming for staff. and in the short term, it is much easier to "just do it yourself." Without a commitment to the objectives, which is kept conscious and alive, there is a danger that staff will just continue to do it themselves. A low key but 'important' orientation to child care program may help in setting the scene for next year in this area.

Group 3 - that is, those objectives related to parent self-esteem and confidence, parenting skills, and the parent/child bond. This is primarily objective 4, and to some extent, 5, remembering how they all interconnect. Although the parent/child bond could be seen as an objective attached to child development, I have chosen to link the above 3 areas to emphasise their interdependence.

Poor self-esteem, low parenting skills, and a somewhat fragile parent/child bond are part and parcel of the myriad of disadvantages and deprivations lived by people with a long term background of poverty. Virtually all the parents who use Limurru fit into this category. They have grown up in poverty, have been poorly housed, nourished, educated, and

parented. They have mostly experienced long, and at least, several shorter term separations from their parents, often in institutions. They will often eloquently reveal stories which illustrate their sense of not having been loved or adequately cared for, and of physical and emotional insecurity. With little more than the TV models of perfect families and parents, these people must set about being 'good' parents to their own children. Society expects it of them, and they expect it of themselves. The same parents are often very young, have inadequate housing, financial and emotional supports. There is little in this guaranteed-to-fail set up which would build up any self-esteem, let alone build up a poor one.

Through the same economic and social pressures as their parents, these people often have separation from their children through illness and stress. Although, in this area, all the parents at Limurru seem to be doing better than their own parents. The parent/child bond is also made fragile by the unmet emotional and other needs of the parents. One cannot give, and give emotionally, to a dependent, needy child when one's own needs remain unmet. Most of the parents have a backlog of unmet needs from their own childhood, as well as currently having poor access to emotional support. So these issues have been tackled together at Limurru, along with general attempts to integrate all aspects of the program, and recognize the interconnectedness of parents' and children's separate and collective needs. There have been very significant improvements in all these areas, but, of course, we are still talking about a small number of people in relation to the large number who live in the area in similar circumstances.

All the activities and programs at Limurru which encourage involvement have self-esteem building as a major component. People gain a great deal of personal support through involvement at Limurru. Taking on tasks small or large, and getting recognition for them boosts self-esteem. Parents took the major responsibility for quite a large scale Fete and a Bush Dance which was held in August. All the steps of preparation along the way, plus the pleasing success of the Fete was great recognition for parents.

Many parents have learned to sew at the sewing group, and have made lovely clothes for their children. Also, helping with, or taking responsibility for, cooking meals is skill developing, and gives recognition and boosts self-esteem. Continuing to explore ways in which parents can feel welcome and encouraged to be involved in the food purchasing and cooking is an important issue for the future. Food is such a central part of the Centre, and of all people's lives, and it is such a wonderful vehicle for meeting many of the Centre's objectives. The policy of not having one staff member employed as a cook is vital to this process.

Limurru has a policy to assist parents gain skills outside Limurru also, and to invite parents to go along to any short courses which staff might attend, and which could be of interest for them. Parents and staff have attended courses on crafts, nutrition, and other child care related subjects, and the parents have really enjoyed these, and have gained in confidence and self-esteem. One parent now has a Projectionist licence, and can show films at Limurru. Funding has been sought, and some obtained, to assist women to learn to drive. Parents were actively involved in preparing the funding application, and the project has been named Women on Wheels. It costs at least \$250 for a person to learn to drive and get a licence, and this is quite out of the reach of Limurru parents. Obtaining a licence is a great personal recognition and lift to confidence. It is also a very important means of independence and mobility which women locked up in high rise flats, with little money, would really benefit. Being able to drive and have access to a car opens up many resources for women which can make their daily lives far easier, and also open up the possibility for learning and growthful experiences.

W.O.W. is the first step in the process for Limurru women. However, to this end, I would also strongly recommend that the possibility of getting a community women's car for Limurru be seriously looked at. This would probably mean getting a car through a donation, but petrol, registration, and repairs could be paid for by a mileage charge for its use. There is the community readiness for such a project at Limurru, and the parents have shown a lot of responsibility and good common sense. It would make progress in the meeting of a number of

goals, but most particularly, would be of great benefit to the women. I would strongly suggest also, at the risk of controversy and criticism, that this be a women's car. It would help to redress some of the male/female social imbalances, and also prevent a lot of difficulties which would result if men were involved.

The building of confidence and self-esteem is a product of the way we work at Limurru, and comes from the process of program implementation. This needs to be considered frequently by the staff team. Ways in which these objectives are being met or could be further integrated into the process of meeting other goals need to be looked for.

Improvements in parenting skills have resulted, partly from direct programming, and to a large extent, from the development of self-esteem and confidence. Parents are getting a lot of personal needs met, and therefore, have more to give to their children. You can always be a better parent if you feel better about yourself. Direct programming efforts have included the Play Group for children aged 0-2. For this program, we were fortunate in obtaining the voluntary help of a very skilled and experienced welfare officer. The co-ordinator also played a major role in this program. It was therefore, a very staff intensive area for a small number of parents, (approximately 4-5), and their children. Advice was sought from the Victorian Play Groups Association, and all attempts were made to keep it appropriate for the needs of the particular parents. The Play Group was quite popular and successful in the first few months, but later lost its momentum. In the early days there was less going on at Limurru, and so parents were more inclined to be in things. Again, there is very little direct recognition for parents, and personal needs are often of higher priority, and better met around the kitchen table with other parents. Not all parents could go to Play Group - maybe this was a mistake and it would have been better to have it open to all pre-school children. At first, however, there were enough parents involved with under 2 year old children. It was necessary to put a lot of planning and preparation time into such a program. You must develop techniques for each session which ensure not only fun and learning for the children, but personal benefits for the parents. This was done through such things as making mobiles,

musical instruments, toys, etc., which can be taken home, and also shown to other people. Personal attention, recognition, and positive feedback about their relating to their children, and other things the parents are doing at Play Group throughout the progress of the session is also important. As the whole Centre progressed at such a rapid rate, the amount of attention given to Play Group diminished somewhat, and this also had an effect on the program.

However, while it was working well for a few months, other results were very obvious and worthwhile. Children's developmental levels improved quite rapidly, and there were similar clear improvements in parenting skills and parents feelings about themselves as parents. Children who were previously almost always left in their pushers or play pens, and virtually ignored, and were therefore quite withdrawn and behind, became quite animated as parents began to relate differently to them. Modelling was again a major technique used throughout Play Group sessions. Parents learned a lot together, and obviously felt good about themselves as parents in the process. Their expectations of their children became more age appropriate. Parents learned to talk more to their children, (and to shout less), and to help language development.

The Play Group seems a very useful tool in the development of parenting skills and the parent/child bond, but is both difficult and time consuming. I would still recommend that it be taken up again next year, and can be particularly useful with newer Limurru parents. Care would always need to be taken that such a program did not become used as a major therapeutic tool, and therefore be putting down of parents rather than self-esteem building.

In association with P.R.A.P.S. Pregnancy Support Project in North Fitzroy, a small child birth and parenting group is being run at Limurru for very young pregnant women. A lot of these young women will probably move into the Fitzroy area after their babies are born, and Limurru could be a major support for them. This early stage is, of course, a very important time for developing parent/child bond and parenting skills.

Low key record books which parents are asked to begin with staff support, record the Limurru children's birth details, early days and ongoing milestones and happenings at Limurru. This technique aims at both parent/child bond and parenting skill development. They are just little exercise books with the child's name, and children's drawings, photos, etc., can be added. It forms a nice communication bridge for staff and parents. Parents love to hear the lovely, (and not so lovely), little things their children do during their time at Limurru. If parents tell staff about something the child has done at home, the staff will encourage the parent to record that in the book also. They have a positive focus; they are useful, for staff and parents do like them, and they can have a positive effect on parent's feelings about their children and their own parenting. However, the books are somewhat time consuming, and staff have to remember to use them. There is also a tendency for staff to record in them without using it as a communication bridge with parents, and also without helping to encourage parents to use them.

A great deal of the work in the area of parenting skills, self-esteem and parent/child bond goes on in very subtle ways, and therefore can be underestimated in importance, or missed by some staff. Staff team time is needed to articulate these more subtle techniques, to help each other to develop them, and to work out where, how, and by whom they should be used. The Co-ordinator needs to play a major role in their articulation and staff development process.

Modelling is an important technique mentioned frequently in this report. One clear example was the use of baby slings. Many parents do not understand the needs of small children, and pre-walkers are often left understimulated, and with very little physical contact such as cuddling. Staff began to use the slings, and in a somewhat playful and non threatening manner, introduced them to the parents. They became almost a fashion for a while at Limurru, and parents received positive feedback, both from staff and from their happy gurgling children.

While practical parenting skill development is significant, it must always be part of the process of the general neighbourhood development. Most importantly, remains the values from

which the program itself springs, and the general support, self-esteem building and confidence gained from being a part of the Centre, and all that goes with it. People who have such improved supports, emotional nurturing, and opportunities to participate feel better about themselves, and therefore, have more to give to their children.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Staff development is a most important adjunct to our attempts to meet all the Limurru objectives. It is a very stressful job for staff. The program is progressing rapidly, and there are so many things to think of and try to incorporate into one's daily work. There are often large numbers of people in a small space, lots of noise, disorganization, and a general hustle and bustle. Staff are committed to the objectives of the place, and are willing to search their own values and ways of working, and to try to work out new ideas and techniques. But these are all energy draining.

Many of the techniques are quite subtle. There is very little staff experience in these areas. Personal values which spring from our socialization, and reflect the prevailing social values, are ever present, and govern, to a great extent, our attitudes to what we see at a place like Limurru, and how we work. The area of child raising, parenting, child care, and so on, is an extremely value laden area. Most people have little experience in exposing and examining their values, and reflecting on how these effect their work. It has been necessary and valuable to place a lot of emphasis in the building and maintenance of a strong, supportive, open staff team. There needs to be that openness and trust so that staff can 'let off steam' from the stresses and pressures, and the issues they confront all the time; then explore values and attitudes, and reflect on how these effect our work, philosophies, and work policies.

This whole area of value clarification, reflection, conceptualization, and relating this back to program planning, and implementation is a major area of work for the Co-ordinator. As is staff development related to community development techniques, and ways of working with the parents. At present,

there is a good sense of co-operation amongst the staff team, a commitment to the objectives of Limurru, and a willingness to deeply consider the important issues. This staff development process has been an ongoing one, integrated into all our discussions and meetings. Regular monthly staff development sessions have been commenced also on the last Thursday of the month. Topics and issues of special interest or current concerns are chosen, films, speakers, etc., arranged, if appropriate, and the issue explored in depth. A whole range of issues could be worked out, plus skill sharing workshops organized by various staff with particular skills and interests. At this stage, however, I would still envisage the need for the Co-ordinator to take primary responsibility for these sessions, and for giving a lot of support and assistance to other staff members if they are to conduct them. These monthly sessions have not been going for very long, and could easily slip by the wayside. I would strongly recommend that they be regularly kept up and given high priority. There are so many issues associated with Limurru with deep philosophical and value implications on which policy and directional decisions will be made. All such decisions should be made after adequate reflection, and Limurru is not an easy place for reflection unless it is well built into routine and carefully guarded.

SUMMARY & NEXT PHASE

The establishment phase has gone well, there is a pleasing degree of parent involvement, and a friendly, positive atmosphere about Limurru. People now have some grasp of what a neighbourhood centre can mean for them and others. Many of the components of the establishment phase, including the outreach, must continue all the way along, but should not need such intense attention.

Much more programming attention must be paid to the more peripheral parents who may want to become more involved. They should be especially invited to things and activities which are known to be good at including people, so that there is an appropriate mix with the more involved parents. Much more work needs to be done with the committee to help them take up the challenge of helping to involve and welcome new parents, so that the committee themselves will see this as a success on

their own behalf. Continued awareness is needed about the dangers of a central clique, and ways to offset this sought.

The next phase might be called the 'consolidation phase' where the benefits and progress are consolidated, and the activities which are operating now work more smoothly. It must also be a broadening phase, however, where more parents use Limurru, and perhaps some of the more established parents use it a bit more discriminatingly, spreading their time over a number of things.

A major issue for consideration next year is the subject of women's issues in relation to Limurru. How much is, and should, Limurru be a women's place, focussing primarily on the needs of women and children? Not excluding fathers, but not especially focussing on their needs. This tends to be the case at present. There are a few fathers associated with those families that have 2 parents who come to Limurru quite frequently. It still does focus on the needs of women, however, as they are the ones doing the presenting, and they are the ones with major, if not total, responsibility for the children. There are other social factors which could be added to this, associated with women's oppressed position in society, and their special needs for self-esteem and confidence building, and personal liberation and growth. Some would say that in order to facilitate this, women need special sanctuary and support in a women oriented place. On the other hand, there is clearly a need amongst males not young enough for CYSS groups, but unemployed and somewhat lost, where do they go, and what do they do? Should Limurru try to meet this need amongst the males associated with Limurru? This would be a large and difficult task. Should it continue to focus on women in a non-articulated way as it does now, but not to the exclusion of males, and try to integrate them a little more into activities as they exist? Should it become even more a women's place, and place more open emphasis on the needs of women? They certainly do bear a great deal of society's burdens, and their oppression is never clearer than at Limurru.

However, this has sorted out, I believe, that some continued emphasis needs to be placed on women's issues. The women are talking about a lot of these issues, and are ready to see films, etc. They get a lot of growthful support from one another

through the sharing of life experiences and problems, and seeing the commonality of these, they learn more about their position in society and their personal situations.

The issue of integration between the parent oriented and child oriented aspects of the program need to be looked at in this next phase. In line with the long term goals, parents will need to gradually take more responsibility. The child care area is a good example of this. It would be hoped that next year sees more parent initiated, and parent run activities. There seems the beginnings of this now.

The questions about the most suitable type of funding need to be addressed. Considerable constraints and pressures have been placed on the service so far, because of the need to obtain funding which is totally geared to child care without any recognition of the other aspects of the Centre. The other financial issue in the longer term is the high cost of the program because of the large staff team. It is clear that the significant progress so far could only have been possible with such a large staff team. The question is how long is such a team needed, and how and when can parents take more responsibility, thus reducing costs, and making the Centre viable in the long term. If this was done prematurely, it would seriously jeopardise the program, but the BSL must also consider its willingness to fund such an expensive project in the long term. It is a program with a lot of value, and very significant progress has been made in the meeting of the objectives, and improving the quality of life for parents and children. However, it is an expensive program. I would sincerely hope that the BSL makes a continuing large commitment to Limurru for at least 5 years. This is needed in order to see if it can become a cheaper, viable, Neighbourhood Parent & Children's Centre, with parents taking at least a major part in its operation, if not having a complete parent managed Centre.

Limurru is indeed the "home they have never had." It means a great deal to the parents who now use it, and is beginning to play an important support role in the local community.