

Healthier Wealthier Families

Information for Stakeholders

In Australia, 1 in 6 children live in poverty, and one quarter experience deprivation (such as missing out on proper nutrition, housing and supportive personal relationships) due to financial hardship.

Poverty and deprivation are more commonly experienced by women, young parents, single parents, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and people experiencing disability and chronic disease.

Australia has a social care system that offers support to families in need. However, families can face stigma and barriers to the services and supports available. These same families may also have lower financial literacy and are at greater risk of being targeted by high-cost and harmful debt services and pay-day lenders. By making better use of Australia's existing infrastructure, it is possible to reduce childhood poverty and deprivation.

Why is the issue important?

Poverty can harm children's future health, learning, economic productivity and participation in society. Without help, poverty can persist across generations. This is a major public health issue. Reducing poverty and inequity will help our whole society be healthier and wealthier.

Key messages

- Poverty in early childhood can have a lasting impact on health and development. In Australia, 1 in 6 children experience poverty and deprivation. By school entry, they have three times the developmental vulnerability of their advantaged peers. As adults, they experience worse health, less wealth, and shorter lives.
- The Healthier Wealthier Families (HWF) project will work at the health and social care interface to connect two freely available services: maternal and child health (MCH) and financial counselling.
- By taking a preventative approach against poverty and deprivation through existing community-based services, HWF aims to improve health, social and economic outcomes for children and families.

What is Healthier Wealthier Families?

Healthier Wealthier Families will test the feasibility and benefits of linking Australia's existing MCH and financial counselling services, and to assess whether it can improve the quality,

efficiency and coordination of responses to poverty and deprivation at little upfront cost.

- Free and independent financial counselling is a major element of the current Australian policy response to poverty.
- These services advocate for people experiencing financial hardship, and help families make independent and informed choices about their money. However, many parents do not seek financial help until they reach crisis.
- MCH services are free and universally available. Nurses use preventative approaches to promote child and family health; and already ask about a range of sensitive issues such as postnatal expressions and family violence.

In the HWF model, MCH nurses will identify families who could benefit from preventative and early referral to a financial counsellor.

The first HWF pilot is underway in Victoria, Australia, in partnership with the City of Whittlesea MCH, Uniting Kildonan Lentara, the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, the University of Melbourne and RMIT University. A second pilot site is being established with collaborators in New South Wales (NSW). The pilot is the first step toward a large-scale trial to examine whether integrating these health and social care services can improve the health and wellbeing of Australian children and families.

Has this worked anywhere else?

Healthier Wealthier Families is an adaption of a model used in Glasgow, Scotland to reduce child poverty. In 2010, the Scottish Government funded a partnership between the National Health Service, local government and the community sector, using their early years

workforce to identify and refer families to community financial counsellors.

As of 2018, this partnership model has resulted in almost 16,000 referrals and over £18 million in total financial gain for families of young children.

What does HWF hope to achieve?

Healthier Wealthier Families is a collaborative and sustainable model that aims to address family and child health and social inequity, and maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of current services.

Planned milestones

January 2020: Formalise agreements with partners and establish protocol for first pilot site

July 2020: Complete recruitment at first site

End 2020: Initial follow-up assessments, and preliminary findings analysed

Find out more:

Contact us at hwf.study@mcri.edu.au.