



# Promising Practice Profiles

<b>Project title</b>	<b>Families and Schools Together (FAST)</b>
<b>Project practice</b>	<b>Early intervention/prevention program to strengthen family functioning and build protective factors in children</b>
<b>Project undertaken by</b>	NT Christian Schools Association (in partnership with Anglicare NT's East Arnhem Communities for Children)
<b>Start date</b>	1 July 2006
<b>Focal areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting families and parents</li> <li>• Early learning and care</li> </ul>
<b>Program</b>	Communities for Children (CfC)
<b>Issue</b>	<p>The program addresses a need for strengthening parenting skills among Indigenous families in remote communities of the Northern Territory. The main focus of this profile is on the adapted implementation of FAST (Families and Schools Together) in the East Arnhem CfC site. However, FAST operates in other remote regions of the Northern Territory and in other contexts within Australia and internationally.</p> <p>The FAST program (© FAST National) is a collaborative and time-limited prevention and parent involvement program designed to address three problems: alcohol and drug abuse; violence and delinquency; and school dropout. Its strategy is to reduce causal factors related to those problems by starting with young children using a family-based model. Children (ages 4–9 years) who display behaviour problems (at school and at home), poor self-esteem, short attention span and hyperactivity are targeted by teachers for this multi-family program.</p>
<b>Program context</b>	<p>FAST is an 8-week, early intervention/prevention program, designed to strengthen family functioning and so build protective factors in children. The program targets the whole family and participation is strictly voluntary. It is conducted in the context of a local school. The core of the program involves eight weekly multi-family meetings usually held in the school during which positive interactional experiences for families are structured and facilitated by a collaborative leadership team. The collaborative team consists of at least four members: a parent partner; a school partner; and two community-based agency partners.</p> <p>FAST uses modelling and practising in its training of weekly activities accompanied by an explanation of the research background to the activities. Use of a video of other FAST programs has given further visual input of activities. The training manuals, which rely on high English literacy, have been modified for use in remote Indigenous settings. A 2-day FAST training program for team members allows for checking of activities against local cultural practices, and for planning the first night's program. The training is beneficial to the team members, as it sets them up for the eight week implementation of the program. Once they have completed the eight week process and have participated in evaluation, team members receive certification and accreditation as FAST team members. When the team experiences a successful program, the confidence of the team members is raised. In particular, parent partners are brought to a level where they gain an interest to pursue further endeavours.</p> <p>FAST programs grew out of suburban, rural, inner city, Native American and First Nation communities in North America. The program was developed by Dr</p>

Lynn McDonald, a family therapist and academic at the University of Wisconsin. FAST targeted families with young children who were not succeeding at school. FAST has operated in Australia since 1996, mainly in Victoria and Western Australia, where it included urban Indigenous families.

The FAST program's implementation in the Northern Territory communities in 2002 was part of a holistic approach to enhance educational outcomes for Indigenous students in that region. The Northern Territory Christian Schools Association (NTCSA) in partnership with local communities established Woolaning Homeland Christian College, a regional, secondary, residential school. From the earliest planning stage, community leaders identified a lack of effective parenting as a key impediment to participation and success in schooling. This is supported by *Learning Lessons*, the Collins' Report into Indigenous Education (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999). By the end of 2006, FAST had been delivered to over 11 communities in the Northern Territory.

FAST has been delivered as a part of Anglicare's NT East Arnhem Communities for Children (CfC) project since 2006. It has been delivered in Numbulwar, Nhulunbuy and Mapuru. In the coming year, FAST programs are planned for Ramingining, Yirrkala, Laynhapuy Homelands, Galiwin'ku and Angurugu.

### **Objectives**

The program targets the whole family, and participation is strictly voluntary. Its ultimate goal is to help young children succeed at home, in early childhood programs, in transition to school, and in the community.

FAST aims to:

#### *1. Enhance family functioning*

- Strengthen the parent-child relationship in specific focused ways.
- Empower the parents to help them become the primary prevention agents for their own children.

#### *2. Prevent the target child from experiencing school failure*

- Improve the child's behaviour and performance in school, both short-term and long-term.
- Empower the parents in their role as partners in the educational process.
- Increase the child's and family's feelings of affiliation toward their school.

#### *3. Prevent substance abuse by the child and family*

- Increase the family's knowledge and awareness of substance abuse, and the impact of substance abuse upon child development.
- Link the family to appropriate assessment and treatment services, as needed.

#### *4. Reduce the stress that parents and children experience from daily life situations*

- Develop an ongoing support group for parents of at-risk children.
- Link the family to appropriate community resources and services, as needed.
- Build the self-esteem of each family member.

### **Practice description**

The program uses a strengths-based approach based on family, community and school collaboration. It promotes increasing parental involvement in the child's life, within the family unit, with other parents in the pre-school, with school personnel and with community agency workers. High levels of parent involvement are a critical protective factor for helping children succeed.

FAST is a dynamic process to empower and involve all parents and to foster family development and cohesion. Its ultimate purpose is to help all children succeed at home, in school, and in the community. The core of the program involves eight weekly multi-family meetings usually held in the school during which positive interactional experiences for families are structured and facilitated by a collaborative leadership team. The collaborative team consists

of at least four members: a parent partner, a school partner, and two community-based agency partners. Each weekly session includes six key elements, including:

1. a meal shared as a family unit;
2. several communication games played at a family table;
3. time for couples;
4. a self-help parent group;
5. one-to-one quality time; and
6. a fixed lucky door prize in which each family wins once (Datatab & Burgess, 2003, p. 5).

### **Key ingredients of the implementation within a remote Indigenous community**

The FAST model has key elements, as described above, which have been effectively implemented in different cultural contexts. While the basic structure remains the same, in remote Indigenous contexts the program is adapted to take into account the different cultural dynamics that are present. FAST follows some basic moral principles that exist in cultures across the whole world, such as, it is good to talk about feelings, it is good to take turns, respecting elders, communication, support, positive relationships, parent child bonding, drugs and alcohol can damage. In the many years of the development of FAST, it was discovered that there are no groups around the world, including Indigenous Australians, that don't see this list as being important in well-functioning communities. The activities practised in FAST make certain that these principles are strengthened to ensure strong, kids, families and communities.

However, there are specific adaptations that have been made for implementation in East Arnhem that have been experienced as key elements of successful implementation in these Indigenous communities.

#### *A whole-of-community approach*

In applying FAST to remote communities, the community takes on the project as a community initiative. Indigenous Australians are a "community" people, so the idea of the whole of community supporting the program is significant. For example, at the Marpuru FAST program, it was not just the immediate family that was involved, rather, the whole community was engaged in the activities.

The programs also need to take into account the possibility that community needs (for example funerals) may from time to time take precedence over the weekly activity. However, because the program is facilitated by trained local people and delivered in local language the immediate relevance of the learning that occurs is not lost in translation. While not discussed in the FAST evidence-based literature, an important feature of the program that may contribute to its effectiveness in remote Indigenous contexts could be that it engages parents with their children in the locus of the community's school. The literature in general supports a view that parent-teacher and parent-school relationships are important for promoting attendance at school and improving school-community outcomes (e.g., Bourke et al., 2000; Mellor and Corrigan, 2004; Department of Education Science and Training, 2006).

#### *Adaptation of program elements, training and resources to suit cultural setting*

FAST was designed to be culturally diverse in its approach, and the program's components are designed to have commonalities across all cultures. The program is also designed to be adaptable to suit various cultural settings.

One important example is that the notion of "family" in Indigenous settings is in significant contrast to the notion of "family" in a western setting. So when talking about *Families And Schools Together*, a whole mindset shift needs to be made as to what that may mean for Indigenous Australians. Funerals impact on program implementation, as it often takes families or members of the team away for several weeks. This can hold up the delivery of the program, and some clever adaptation and readjusting needs to be made so that FAST's impact may still be delivered.

The training of the locally based team had to be redesigned to suit often

illiterate team members. The training has been redesigned to be primarily pictorial, and team members practice all the components to understand its intent and effect. Team members are often related to the families attending, so other dynamics come into play, such as, the responsibility those team members have for children who may attend.

**A key objective of FAST in indigenous communities is to complement and build upon the traditional knowledge, skills and wisdom of Indigenous parents to enhance positive parenting within the region.**

2007 was an exciting year for achieving some significant milestones in program adaptation, research and development to ensure that the components in the program are suited to Indigenous Australians. The following comment made by an Indigenous team sums up this sentiment:

“It is like the FAST program is written for us and our people; this is like the way it used to be for us. We are excited that FAST will help us, our children and our community go back to the way how we used to work together with each other, and walked alongside our children, to teach them the proper way.”

*The importance of the training team as “cultural interpreters”.*

As FAST is delivered by a team living in the community, it is able to be delivered in the local language and in the appropriate cultural way and there is less chance of making cultural errors. As all components have been delivered in over 10 communities, evidence has shown the components to be suited to Indigenous Australians.

The FAST training manual continues to undergo constant modification and development utilising feedback from the Indigenous training teams undergoing the FAST training. Felt boards, booklets, and other components rewritten in local language have assisted in the training and delivery.

*Extensive community consultation*

Extensive consultation takes place before implementing FAST in a community (often 3 to 6 visits) to ensure the trainers are aware and mindful of the cultural setting into which they are entering. In this way, respect and trust develops and local people are more empowered to deliver a program they can take ownership of.

To enable continued adaptive development of the program and tools FAST has had ongoing consultation with Charles Darwin university as to better develop both quantitative and qualitative evaluation material suited to Indigenous Australians. This is a lengthy process but worthwhile so the results in remote settings can be more informative and compelling.

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## **Research base**

The efficacy of the approaches used by FAST is supported by a body of literature that includes evaluation and research conducted by FAST itself, internationally (Caspé & Lopez, 2006) and within Australia (Coote, 2000; Datatab & Burgess, 2003; Seiffert, 2005, 2006) and by other research conducted more generically relating to the application of FAST operational principles and practices. These translate into elements of the program model (Wisconsin Center for Education Research, 2007) as: a shared meal; communication games played at a family table; time for couples; a self-help parent group; one-to-one quality play; and a fixed lucky door prize in which each family wins once.

The basis of these activities is drawn from an extensive array of research sources drawn from work carried out up to the early 1990s. The literature cited by FAST (McDonald, 2000) describes the importance of parent-child interaction (e.g., Dunst et al., 1988; Gettinger et al., 1992; Webster-Stratton, 2002); child-initiated play (e.g., Barkeley 1987); and empowering parents to be involved in their children’s learning (e.g., Dunst et al., 1988 also cited in Rous et al., 2003).

The importance of many of these approaches and outcomes is affirmed by the broader body of international evidence relating to investment in early childhood programs (e.g., OECD, 2006; UNESCO, 2006; Keeley, 2007), as well as national and international literature relating to the need for such

programs to address factors impacting on outcomes for disadvantaged families and children (e.g., Centre for Community Child Health and The Smith Family, 2004; The Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, 2004). Notable international reports such as the OECD's *Well-being of the Nations* and *PISA* reports (e.g., OECD, 2001, 2003, 2004) highlight the significance and value of early interventions that support parents and young children—particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds.

**Outcomes**

The outcomes which are discussed in evaluation reports are:

1. reported improvements by parents/families/carers in addressing their current difficulties at completion of the initial program of 8 weeks at one year and two year follow-up;
2. improved engagement by the child/parents/families with the NTCSA who are delivering the program;
3. reported engagement by mothers using other community based services as appropriate to their needs;
4. service indicators and baseline data available to assist in monitoring and evaluating the program;
5. community members available to deliver the program; and
6. local professionals available to support the program.

The program addresses the following AEDI domains: social competence, social maturity, communication skills, general knowledge and support to single parents.

**Evidence of outcomes**

The Nhulunbuy 2007 evaluation report (McDonald et al., 2007) describes the methodology as follows:

“The FAST evaluation uses a repeated measures, non-experimental design with two independent raters. Parents and teachers are the typical raters in the Elementary School model. Each rater completes a survey measure designed specifically to measure FAST goals. Parents answer questions about social relationships, social support, involvement in their child’s education, family environment, and the child’s social strengths and difficulties. Teachers complete a survey about the child’s strengths and difficulties and the parent’s involvement in the school. Responses provided before the program and after the program are paired to determine the level of change that has occurred during the FAST program. Demographic and participant satisfaction information is also collected from parents. The outcome evaluation design was developed by Dr. Lynn McDonald and Dr. Stephen Billingham in 1989 for the Statewide FAST Initiative in Wisconsin. The outcome evaluation reporting structure was developed for the Centre for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) in 1991 by Dr. Lynn McDonald and Dr. Thomas Sayger.” (p. 7)

Data collection proceeds in a standardised manner across all FAST sites. All schools or sites use a standard protocol to invite families to participate in the FAST program. School personnel contact families about FAST, and those families who wish to have more information or wish to participate receive home visits from FAST team members. At this visit, team members explain more about the program and ask the parents to complete the pre-program surveys. Parents also complete an informed consent form that explains how confidentiality is maintained. The teachers are given their pre-program surveys after the target child’s parent gives informed consent. Participation by parents and children is strictly voluntary. When the program has ended, team members distribute post-program surveys to parents and teachers. After the post-program surveys are completed and returned, the evaluation materials are sent to FAST National Training and Evaluation Centre for analysis. The coded data are then entered and analysed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). An independent program evaluator is then assigned to summarise and interpret the data.

The evaluation reports for Numbulwar and Nhulunbuy both show outcomes in terms of child behaviour, attitude and relationships. At Numbulwar, for example, parents reported:

- 23% increase in their child's social behaviours; and
- 30% decrease in conduct problems.

The teacher reported:

- 38% decrease in emotional symptoms;
- 22% decrease in hyperactivity; and
- 16% decrease in peer problems (Seiffert 2006, p. 2).

After examining the responses from data collected, the Nhulunbuy report (McDonald et al., 2007) concluded that:

“There is evidence to suggest that the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program at Nhulunbuy Primary School achieved the desired objectives of improving parental efficacy, the parent's social connectedness, the FAST children's behaviours and the parents' involvement with school and substance use behaviour.”  
(p.18)

The evaluation at Nhulunbuy also showed significant improvements based on pre- and post-test scores for a number of variables:

- improvements in social connectedness were indicated by a significant increase in the parents' support received from others scores;
- parents exhibited an improvement in their general efficacy scores suggesting they had developed greater mastery in their abilities to accomplish daily tasks;
- both parents and teachers observed positive changes in many of the children's behaviours: parents noted significant improvements in pro-social behaviour, emotional symptoms and hyperactivity scores as well as decreasing trends in conduct problems, total difficulties and impact scores; and
- parents displayed significant improvements in their contact with school and school to parent contact scores as well as an increasing trend in parent to school contact scores.

Evidence from evaluations done throughout each program has shown that FAST has achieved the desired objectives of improving family functioning, social connectedness, parental efficacy, the target child's behaviour and attendance, and parental involvement with the school.

The weekly process of FAST empowers parents to practice a range of skills that are directly applicable in helping their child succeed at home and at school. The follow-on program FASTWORKS continues to empower the parents even further in their endeavours to build resilient successful children. FASTWORKS has been implemented reasonably successfully in Numbulwar, as there have been local paid people to implement the monthly follow on meetings.

In the context of remote Indigenous communities, the experience thus far is that the impact of FAST extends beyond the relatively narrow range of reported family, parent and child behaviours. In some cases where FAST has been run at remote out-stations, the whole community may get involved. An example of this was noted at Mapuru in the Anglicare East Arnhem CFC site. The impact of the program extends beyond parents and children in a location like this and FAST does much to support and empower local community leaders (including parents) to aspire and achieve better educational outcomes for all their children.

In October 2007, Mapuru featured in an ABC news story in which members of the community have publicly requested a full-time teacher (rather than one that is available three days per week) from the NT Government (ABC, 2007). While hesitant to attribute this bold move directly to FAST, the project believes that FAST does much to support parents and community members when they wish to improve educational outcomes for their young children. Emerging evidence (as yet unpublished) from other FAST sites in the Northern Territory suggests that participants of FAST programs are more likely to regularly attend at school than non-participants, up to three years on from running the program.

### **Consideration of the limitations of the evidence and the development of culturally relevant evaluation.**

In Indigenous contexts, FAST managers recognise that evaluation strategies based on standardised psychological tests used in other places need to be modified to more accurately reflect the changes that take place. The NT FAST team are currently reviewing their evaluation tools to make them more appropriate. This may involve a higher reliance on qualitative methods than is currently the case.

It is acknowledge that there are some significant limitations to the evidence obtained in relation to FAST within the East Arnhem site. The limitations relate to the amount of data available and the quality and/or appropriateness of that data. These limitations mean that generalisations based on the data obtained to date should not be made. However, an evidence base is being built across a number of sites that will inform the ongoing development of the program (and similar programs) within the site and in other Indigenous contexts.

The limitations of existing evaluations strategies are being addressed by:

- working with Charles Darwin University to build a better set of tools that will provide a consistent and culturally appropriate evaluation framework for all work with Indigenous communities, not just the East Arnhem site;
- gathering data and aggregating this data from multiple sites across the Northern Territory. This aggregated data set will prove increasingly valuable over time; and
- building the capacity of the local FAST teams.

These local FAST teams are fundamentally important for the success of the program in terms of translating the concepts and ideas into Indigenous languages. Building team capacity means there will be a clearer translation of participants' understanding of the concepts and their practical application within the life of Indigenous families. This is particularly important for evaluation.

These strategies will increase confidence in the data collected and better inform the ongoing iterative development of the program into the future.

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### **Policy analysis**

*Replicability*—Evidence from the repeat delivery of the program across Australia and internationally (Datatab & Burgess 2003) indicates that FAST is adaptable to a variety of contexts. Taking into account the limitations of existing evaluation methods for indigenous communities, East Arnhem FAST has been delivered with positive outcomes in both Indigenous community schools and mainstream schools in mainly non-Indigenous contexts.

*Sustainability*—The reputation of FAST within the East Arnhem region appears to have been strengthened following its initial delivery into three sites. The 2007 FAST Evaluation report (Education Transformations and NT Christian Schools Association 2007) indicates NT Christian Schools Association's ongoing commitment to the implementation of FAST and to working collaboratively with Charles Darwin University and other partners in the CfC group to continue to develop culturally relevant evaluation and adaptation mechanisms.

*Contribution to existing evidence base*—The evaluation of FAST in East Arnhem builds on the body of FAST Australia and international evidence by providing comparative data. Extension of the evaluation methodology to include qualitative data collection and analysis is of particular importance for two primary reasons:

- to deepen the understanding of the impact FAST may have on the local communities in which it is implemented; and
- to extend understanding of the process of adaptation of program models into new cultural contexts.

In this particular project there is a need to have closer examination of the decision making informing adaptation and the process of evolution that occurs as further programs are implemented in new communities.

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<p><b>Project related publications</b></p>	<p>Seiffert, M. (2005). <i>Families and Schools Together as a community development tool in remote Indigenous communities in Northern Territory</i>. Paper presented at Families Matter, 9th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference. 9–11 February, 2005, Melbourne.</p>
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<b>More information</b>	More information on the Families and Schools Together (FAST) Project and <i>Promising Practice Profiles</i> can be found on the PPP pages of the Communities and Families Clearinghouse of Australia website at <a href="http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/ppp.html">http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/ppp.html</a> .



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