

## ***Executive summary***

The Raising Children Network (RCN) developed the Raising Children website following recommendations arising out of the Parenting Information Project, commissioned by the Australian Government in 2004. Development of the website began in 2005 and the website was launched in May 2006.

RCN is a Consortium comprised of the Centre for Community Child Health and the Parenting Research Centre. These two organisations are experts in the child health and wellbeing field.

The Raising Children website targets two key audiences relating to children aged 0-8 years: parents and professionals. The website has been designed to provide evidence-based, practical and reliable information to both of these target groups in an easily accessible format. The Raising Children philosophy is that parents should be provided with practical, reliable and evidence-based information on which to base their own parenting decisions. The website is non-commercial; funding is received via state and federal government departments, not through advertising or promotion of commercial interests.

The development of the Raising Children website and the content for the site has been guided by members of three key bodies: a Steering Committee, Scientific Advisory Board and Review Panel. The Scientific Advisory Board and Review Panel continue to play an invaluable and essential role in responding to feedback about content, reviewing content and developing new content.

While the preference of RCN is to create articles authored by the Consortium, approximately 20% of the entire content has been licensed to RCN by third parties. Licensing agreements with these third parties prevents RCN from licensing this content to others.

The Raising Children website's core content consists of over 800 articles across the following domains: behaviour, health and daily care, development, nutrition, play and learning, connecting and communicating, safety and sleep. The website also has information and resources specifically for 'grown-ups' and for professionals. Additional funding has allowed the development of new sections of the website covering information on parenting children with a disability and parenting children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. The most recent funding received will allow the Raising Children website to expand to include information for parents of children in the pre-teen and early to mid-adolescent years.

The Raising Children website has proven popular with both parents and professionals in the early childhood field. Evaluations of the website are conducted every six months, and analysis of statistics shows that the website's visits are steadily increasing. Feedback received via the website (email and surveys) and other anecdotal sources demonstrates the website's value.

The Raising Children website is currently funded until 2011. While RCN is hopeful that support from the Australian government will be ongoing, other forms of sponsorship would be considered in order to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the website.

## ***Introduction***

### **Background**

In May 2003, the then Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, demonstrated the government's commitment to early childhood initiatives by contributing substantial funds to a number of projects, including the 'Parenting Information Project' conducted in 2004.

The first phase of the project was to uncover what information parents wanted and needed to assist them in their parenting role, and how they would prefer to receive this information. The second phase involved developing and testing parenting information and/or products based on the findings of Phase One.

One of the recommendations that arose from the Parenting Information Project was to develop a parenting information website.

### **Why a parenting information website?**

The Parenting Information Project found that parents were raising children in an era of unprecedented focus and critical examination. Yet despite the preoccupation with 'getting parenting right', parents were finding it difficult to find the information or help they needed. While there were a considerable number of web resources already designed to support parents, there were four major concerns with these:

- ✿ They overloaded parents and professionals with information, rather than providing selective or easily navigated resources.
- ✿ They were not always based on credible, current, evidence-based research and science.
- ✿ They did not consistently provide material that was desirable; the quality, substance and tone were inconsistent and some of the material was judgemental.
- ✿ They often directed parents to external resources and links regardless of their quality or suitability.

The Australian Government agreed with the recommendation to develop a national parenting website that would address the concerns outlined above, and commenced a tender process under the Early Childhood – *Invest to Grow* initiative 2004–2008.

### **The Raising Children Network (RCN)**

In response to the tender, three organisations – Smart Population Foundation (SPF), the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) and the Parenting Research Centre (PRC) came together as the Raising Children Network Consortium, and successfully tendered to develop the website. With initial funding from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), development of the website began in 2005.

### **The RCN Consortium**

**CCCH** is a department of the Royal Children's Hospital, a research centre of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and has academic links to the University of Melbourne. The mission of the CCCH is to "support communities to improve child health outcomes".

The Centre is widely recognised locally and internationally for leadership in early childhood and community child health and for clinical, teaching, research and advocacy programs, and is at the forefront of Australian efforts to urge government funded programs to support parents in the early childhood years. It is internationally recognised for research in prevention, health promotion, early detection, and child public health, as well as for parent and professional education and information.

The Centre has significant industry programs and links, and publishes three national resources for community nurses, hospitals, childcare and other early childhood providers four times each per year. The Centre is uniquely positioned to influence practice through training programs and dissemination of new techniques, protocols and research findings.

**PRC** has built a national and international reputation as a research leader in evidence-based parenting support since its launch in 1997. The Centre researches, develops and implements high quality evidence-based programs and resources, including universal prevention programs and interventions designed to support families with high and complex needs. The Centre has led the development of a conceptual basis for understanding parenting, parenting development and parenting support, and has developed an extensive framework for guiding collaborative professional practice in engaging with parents. It has a reputation for sound project management, high quality outcomes and excellent value for money.

**SPF** was established in 2002 to help prevent harm and improve long-term outcomes for children by facilitating the synthesis and translation of parenting science, including child development, health, safety and communication, for all Australians. This includes national distribution of tools and resources using television, DVD, CDR, print and internet. Early in 2009, PRC took on SPF's responsibilities for RCN. As such, the RCN Consortium now consists of PRC and CCCH.

Overall, the Raising Children Network comprises impressive credentials in delivering a parenting website that is underpinned by excellence in research and science, and which combines state of the art communications and media to produce an easy to use, comprehensive, and conceptually powerful resource.



## ***Strategic approach and philosophy***

### **Strategy**

RCN developed a strategy to enhance the capacity of two main target groups: parents and professionals. A 'parent' includes any person who has adopted a parenting role in relation to a specific child, which may or may not involve a biological relationship. A parent is someone *doing* parenting. A 'professional' is any practitioner who has a role in supporting and assisting parents.

The strategy aims to enhance the parenting capacity of individuals through the direct provision of parenting information and programs. It also aims to enhance the capacity of professionals in the health, welfare and educational sectors to engage with and respond effectively to parents.

The design of the Raising Children website was influenced by three key factors:

1. how to get the information to the target groups
2. how to structure and present the information in such a way that it would lead to behaviour change
3. how to engage and support the large variety of individuals within the target groups.

The strategy resulted in the development of the following information categories:

- ✿ Information about raising children.
- ✿ Information for adults about being a parent (finance, family management, mental health, etc).
- ✿ Information for parents about interacting with the community and social networks.
- ✿ Information for parents as consumers of professional services.
- ✿ Information for professionals about how to engage parents and enhance parental adaptability.

### **Philosophy**

RCN's philosophy is to make reliable, practical information available for parents so that parents can make their own informed decisions. RCN aims to work with experts to provide evidence-based or best practice information about child development, health and behaviour.

RCN places a high degree of importance on the credibility of the information provided to parents, and for that reason, does not advertise or promote any other commercial interests on the website.

## ***Direction, guidance and review***

RCN established three key bodies to assist in the strategic direction of the website, and the review and publication of content and other resources: a Steering Committee, a Scientific Advisory Board and a Review Panel.

### **Steering Committee**

The Steering Committee consists of 11 leading thinkers in child health and wellbeing from across Australia. Members were recruited to provide guidance and strategic direction for the project, and played a key role, particularly in the development stages, in advising on the planning and future evolution of the site. Specific responsibilities include:

- ❁ to providing advice regarding the evaluation of the site
- ❁ to provide advice about the development of content priorities
- ❁ to provide advice about the development of specific promotional campaigns
- ❁ to consider and endorse final drafts of the quality assurance process, content grid and functionality, communications strategy, stakeholder plan and evaluation framework
- ❁ to provide support to the project team between meetings
- ❁ to review the progress of the RCN website.

### **Scientific Advisory Board**

The Scientific Advisory Board consists of ten internationally recognised experts in the parenting and early childhood areas. Each member is allocated a domain, in accordance with their expertise. Members guide the website content and are responsible for maintaining its independence and professional integrity. Specific responsibilities include:

- ❁ to provide high level strategic advice on content development
- ❁ to advise RCN on responding to feedback or issues raised by readers and/or key stakeholders
- ❁ to assist in identifying quality assurance (QA) reviewers
- ❁ to review all articles to be published in their domain
- ❁ to review existing articles as requested and provide advice to RCN on whether the article needs to be updated or revised
- ❁ to ensure quality assurance reviewers' comments have been satisfactorily addressed

### **Review Panel**

RCN's Review Panel is a large group of approximately 125 national and international experts who review and rate all material developed for, or linked to, the website. All content on the Raising Children Network website goes through this stringent 'quality assurance' process to ensure that parents and professionals are being provided with quality, evidence-based, credible information.

Each completed article is sent to two people on RCN's Review Panel. These two 'quality-assurers' ensure that information provided in an article is current, accurate and representative of current evidence or best practice. Once an article has passed through the quality-assurance process, it is submitted to a member of the Scientific Advisory Board for a final review. All articles are then signed off by a member of the RCN Executive prior to publication.

## Content

Approximately 80% of RCN content is developed by the Consortium, with the remaining 20% (a figure that is decreasing) being provided externally. RCN is focused on reducing the number of articles that have been licensed by other providers through a process of creating new, RCN-authored articles.

### Content partners

RCN has licensing agreements with several organisations that have provided material to RCN for use on the RCN website. Due to contractual obligations, RCN is unable to license that content to a third party.

### Core content

The Raising Children Network website currently displays **over 800 articles** across eight domains and five age categories.

Domains	Categories
Behaviour	Newborn
Connecting and communicating	Babies
Development	Toddlers
Health and daily care	Preschoolers
Nutrition	School-age
Play and learning	
Safety	
Sleep	

In addition to this core content, the website incorporates a wide range of resources, from introductory to comprehensive, to reflect the varying stages of problem solving that parents and professionals need.

### Support for parents

- ✿ **Grown ups** – specific information for adults, designed to help parents feel represented and part of a support network and to provide resources for common family management issues. Categories include Family Management, Looking After Yourself, Parents Like Me, Pregnancy, For Fathers, Work and Family, Dealing with Separation, Money and Finances, Parenting and the Law.
- ✿ **Online forums** – allows all users to interact through the posting and answering of questions. Forums provide the opportunity to generate specific subject or theme-related discussions and alleviate isolation for parents.
- ✿ **Services and support** – provides easy and quick access to important support services, as well as empowering parents as consumers by describing where, when and how to use professional services to obtain the maximum benefit. Categories include, Child Care to School, Hotlines, Links and Resources, Local Services, Subscribe to Emails.
- ✿ **My Neighbourhood** – a map-based, interactive functionality, enabling parents to easily find sources of support in their local area.

### Developmental guides

- ✿ **'Grow With Us'** emails – parents who register a child's birth date receive age-specific content emails to coincide with major developmental milestones. These include helpful tips and links to relevant sections on the website.

## Innovative learning and interacting tools

- ☼ **Activities** – parents can find light-hearted and fun activities related to interacting with and supporting children, including Charts and Sheets, Interactive Tools and Activities.
- ☼ **Baby Karaoke** – an animated video resource that allows parents to sing along with their children by displaying the words to songs and nursery rhymes as the tune is played. (Developed in collaboration with the Australian Music Foundation)
- ☼ **Parenting in Pictures** – innovative use of images to convey key information such as safety. Similar in concept and design to an Airline Emergency Procedures card, these resources are widely understood by people of varying backgrounds and literacy levels.
- ☼ **Make a Book** – allows parents or professionals to collate parenting information that is of interest to them into a PDF document that can be saved and printed to refer back to at any time.

## Resources for professionals

- ☼ **Working with parents** – guides to engaging with and supporting parents effectively. Topics include, How to Help Parents, Communicating with Parents, Organisations and Resources, Working with Interpreters, Vulnerable Families and Families Need Your Help.
- ☼ **Practice resources** – 11 printable PDFs providing an introduction to the topic, a summary of the latest research and practical strategies to support professionals' work.
- ☼ **Links and resources** – a range of links to resources to assist professionals in their daily practice.

## Children with special needs

### *Disability*

In 2006, RCN received funding from the New South Wales state government Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (DADHC) to focus on the development of disability-specific content for inclusion on the Raising Children website. The disability-specific content includes descriptions of recognised therapeutic models and treatments, information on managing behaviour and transitions, information about the impact on the family of caring for a child with a disability, generic consumer guidelines for the health and education system, and information for parents about where and how they can access information, looking after themselves and coping with grief, stress and other common emotions.

### *Autism Spectrum Disorders*

In 2008, RCN received funding from the Mental Health and Autism branch of FaHCSIA to develop additional Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) materials and functionality for the Raising Children website under the Federal Government's 'Helping Children with Autism' package.

The new content includes:

- ☼ **Learning about autism** – a guide to the characteristics and signs of Autism Spectrum Disorder, what causes it and how it is diagnosed.
- ☼ **Guide to therapies** – detailed descriptions of autism therapies and interventions to help parents choose what's best for their child.
- ☼ **Service pathfinder** – an interactive tool to find available local Australian services and resources.
- ☼ **Parent forums** – a forum dedicated to parents of children with ASD.



## Teenagers

In 2009, RCN received funding from the Children and Parenting Support Branch of FaHCSIA to expand the website to include information for parents and professionals about children aged 9-15. Fifteen is the age at which the jurisdiction of the funding body expires. RCN aims to develop approximately 100 additional articles and other resources on the pre-teen and teenage years by late 2011.

## Search functions

Website users can search for information on the site using one of four methods, depending on what best suits their need and internet knowledge. These are:

- ✱ **Drop-down menus** – allows users to browse content by age of the child (e.g. babies, toddlers, etc) and by domain (e.g. development, behaviour, etc).
- ✱ **A Sensis-powered (Yellow Pages) search** – gives users a means of finding parenting services by locality and by postcode.
- ✱ **A search box** – all content is extensively categorised to ensure users find what they are looking for quickly and efficiently.
- ✱ **An A-Z index search** – allows users to search by alphabetical listings of content.



## ***Performance to date***

- ✿ The website has received over 10,000,000 visits since it was launched on 17 May 2006 (Australia's population has just passed 22 million).
- ✿ The website averages between 650,000 and 1,000,000 page views each month.
- ✿ The website won the Netguide Australian Web Award for *Best Parenting Website*, and was also recognised with their highest honour as *2007 Site of the Year*. At the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual AIMIA Awards, the website won the *Best Non-profit or Government* category. One of the AIMIA judges commented that the RCN website is "an innovative site, packed with useful features. Plenty on the site to keep parents and soon-to-be parents coming back for more. It's the sort of site the target would 'bookmark' or 'add to favourites'".
- ✿ Feedback from parents and professionals about the website has been overwhelmingly positive. Parents have found the website to be informative, interesting, well-researched and user friendly.
  - "I think this is invaluable information for parents at all stages."
  - "Finding parenting one of the hardest but accomplishing jobs to do, it makes me feel a lot better to know that I can find the information that I need to. It puts my mind at rest to know this website is here for me to access anytime I need it..."
  - "Finally, a website that helps with what to feed my child. I have an eight month old fussy little boy and my health centre didn't help me with suggestions and until today neither did the internet."
  - "Thank you for this information. I found basic, straight-forward suggestions on weaning my baby. I feel sometimes we are given so much information that it becomes confusing – not in this case...wish me luck!!!"
- ✿ A recent survey confirmed the benefits of the Raising Children website, with 97 per cent of users agreeing the website was useful, clear, comprehensive, credible and easily navigated.
- ✿ Ninety-one percent of parents felt the Raising Children website could make them more confident as a parent and 95 per cent would recommend the website to other parents or carers.

## ***Funding***

Following the Parenting Information Project and decision to fund a parenting information website, RCN has received a total of \$11,000,000 in funding from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (Commonwealth), the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (State) and the Katherine West Health Board (State).

The Raising Children website is not a profit-making venture. However, RCN has a sponsorship policy and may consider sponsorship in order to sustain the website beyond the current committed funding period.

