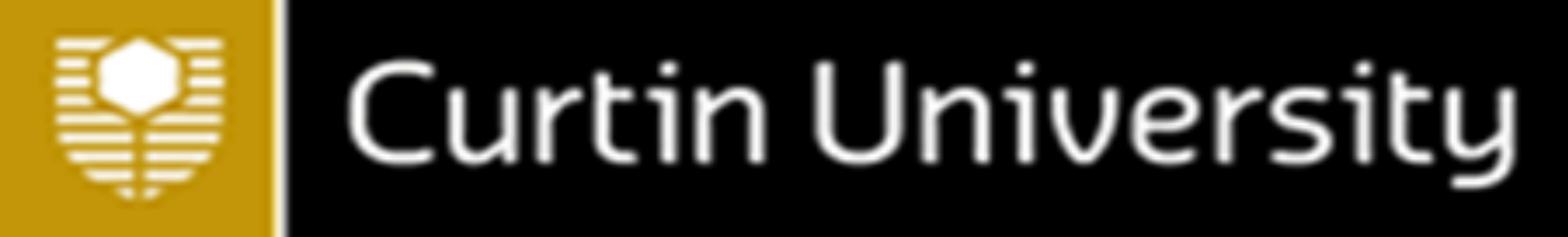# "I DON'T THINK MY CHILD WOULD BE ALIVE IF I DIDN'T GO": EXPLORING PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY IMPACT PROGRAMS

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Introduction and Rationale

- There is increasing demand on the not-for-profit (NFP) sector to address community social needs.
- Community Impact Programs (CIPs) offer one mechanism for increasing reach in community service provision.
- Social, cultural, and family needs, within the community of Midland, Western Australia, have prompted the adoption of CIPs through a NFP: CLAN Midland, funded by United Way West Australia.
- FAST® (Families and Schools Together) is an early intervention program designed to empower parents, promote child resilience, and strengthen the relationships between parents, communities and schools (Coote, 2000; McDonald, Coe-Braddish, Billingham, Dibble & Rice, 1991).
- Baby FAST® aims to engage new young parents in developing strong, positive relations with one another and their child, increase parental self-efficacy, and counter experiences of social stigma and isolation (Fletcher, Fairtlough & McDonald, 2013).
- Anecdotal evidence of impact of the programs FAST and Baby FAST prompted formal exploration of participant experience, and the opportunity to give voice to the community.
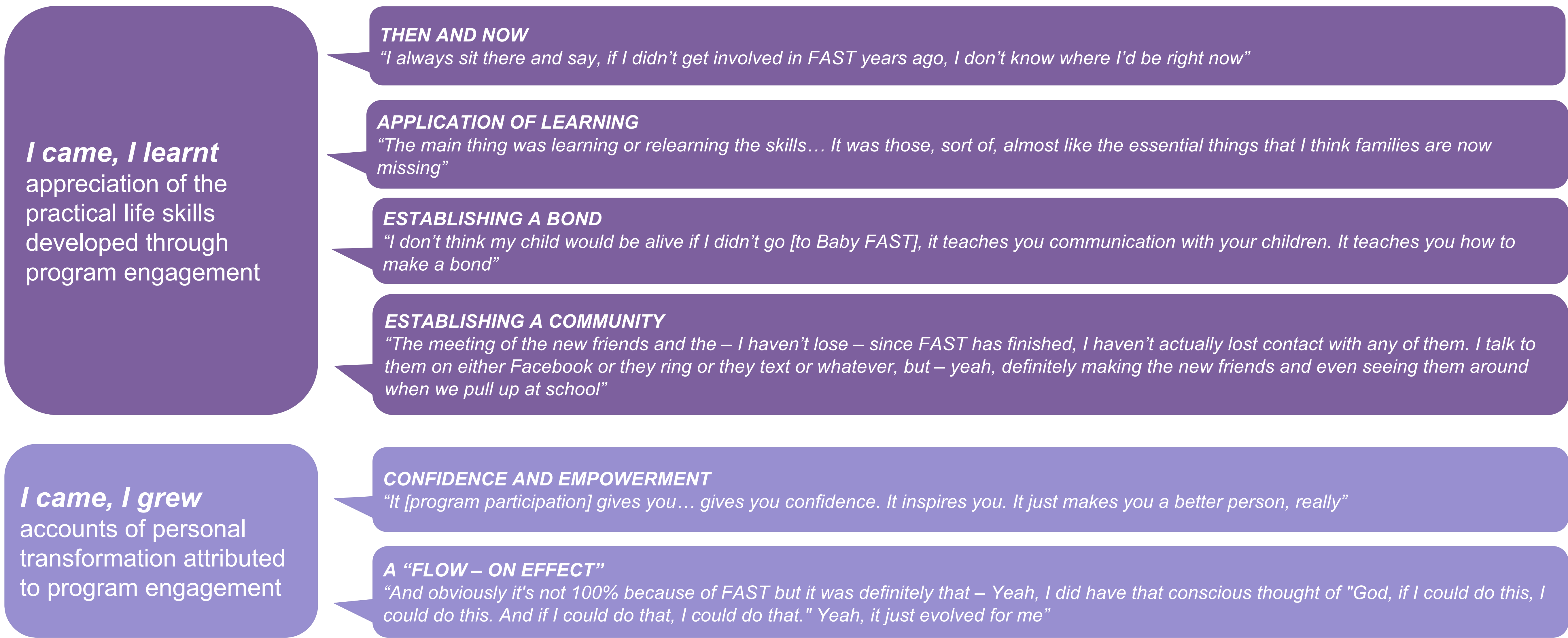
Research Aim: to explore the experiences of parents and guardians participating in Community Impact Programs

Design, Methodology and Method

- Qualitative inquiry adopting a Social Constructionist epistemological perspective (Gergen, 1985).
- 23 semi-structured interviews with parents or guardians, currently or previously engaged in one or more CIPs.
- Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings

- Participants shared great detail of their often highly challenging life experiences; their story providing valuable context as to the significance and value of CIP outcomes.
- Two overarching themes and a series of sub themes emerged.

I came, I learnt appreciation of the practical life skills developed through program engagement

THEN AND NOW
"I always sit there and say, if I didn't get involved in FAST years ago, I don't know where I'd be right now"

APPLICATION OF LEARNING
"The main thing was learning or relearning the skills… It was those, sort of, almost like the essential things that I think families are now missing"

ESTABLISHING A BOND
"I don't think my child would be alive if I didn't go [to Baby FAST], it teaches you communication with your children. It teaches you how to make a bond"

ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY
"The meeting of the new friends and the – I haven't lose – since FAST has finished, I haven't actually lost contact with any of them. I talk to them on either Facebook or they ring or they text or whatever, but – yeah, definitely making the new friends and even seeing them around when we pull up at school"

I came, I grew accounts of personal transformation attributed to program engagement

CONFIDENCE AND EMPOWERMENT
"It [program participation] gives you… gives you confidence. It inspires you. It just makes you a better person, really"

A "FLOW – ON EFFECT"
"And obviously it's not 100% because of FAST but it was definitely that – Yeah, I did have that conscious thought of "God, if I could do this, I could do this. And if I could do that, I could do that." Yeah, it just evolved for me"

Discussion and Conclusion

- The theme, *I came, I grew,* illustrated participants' confidence development and a trend towards increased community engagement, a reported mechanism for further growth in confidence and empowerment.
- The sub-theme, *A "flow-on effect",* illustrated the positive impact of confidence development on participants' immediate and extended family (e.g., role modelling: healthy physical and mental health, pursuit of higher education and employment, improved literacy, community engagement) through to their broader community (e.g., adopting school and community leadership and service roles).
- Personal transformation and growth was unanticipated by participants; the impact of confidence development illustrated transformative and genuine empowerment through the redistribution of resources and power, particularly through the development of agency in service roles (Riger, 1993).
- Through exploring participants' experiences, we have understood the impact of the CIPs as being beyond program specific goals, and transformative for not only the individuals and families, but also their communities.

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