



# ZOE SUPPORT

## re-engaging young mums in education

Zoe Support is an in-venue service under the Mildura Rural City Council Family Day Care Scheme. In April 2013, the Zoe Centre opened its doors for the first time to provide child care and a hub for young mums in the Mildura region, aiming to support them in re-engaging in education. The centre opened with one 17-year-old mum and her three-month-old baby girl. Now, just a little over 14 months later, 22 young mothers are involved with their children.

The centre provides family day care as the framework to meet regulatory requirements, however within six months it was clear this could only be a temporary solution. The centre juggles child care with visiting children who are under the care of their mothers, while they attend activities at the centre. Life skills programs such as positive parenting, maternal and child health visits, and self-esteem courses all occur at the centre along with cooking each Wednesday which concludes with mums, children and staff sharing a meal together.

The supported playgroup is open to any young mum to come and visit. Another important program is the social enterprise of Bibs & Buntings where Zoe young mums are invited to become part of the weekly sewing program, making bibs and buntings, learning and expanding their skills, socialising and creating products they then sell at the local markets. The funds raised go toward Zoe Gift Baskets, which are distributed through the local hospital and Aboriginal service. The Zoe mums make up baskets of newborn baby items, each basket is worth \$80 and over 120 have been handed out in the last

18 months. The mums involved in this program love the idea of 'paying it forward' to other isolated mums to let them know they are not alone. The centre has a study room with computers, internet and printing facilities. Nine Zoe mums are currently engaged in education programs at the two schools nearby as well as at a Flexible Learning Options centre, and two others study online.

The Zoe Centre exists to support young mums to engage at school while providing a positive early learning environment for their children and a social space for the development of life skills. Often when a teen discovers she is pregnant she disengages from school because she has no options for support once her baby is born. The Zoe Centre provides the opportunity for young mums to continue school, because of the close proximity of the centre to the schools mums can drop in to breastfeed or simply spend time with their children. As 21-year-old mother of two, Amber, says:

*Doing my VCE at Mildura Senior College while my baby and toddler are a few doors down in day care is amazing! I can see them during my 'free's' and during recess & lunch! And I get to hang with other young mums who are passionate and inspiring.*

For those young mums already disengaged from education, high-risk behaviours that were prevalent often cease once pregnant and they tell the story that becoming a mum made them re-evaluate their future for the sake of their child. Amber says she is now completing her VCE Year 12 and intends to enrol in university in 2015. Prior to becoming pregnant with her now four-year-old, she was squatting in an abandoned house, drinking heavily and involved in other antisocial behaviours.

Hence, the Zoe Centre sits between two secondary colleges. A close working

relationship with the schools and other agencies is essential. The Zoe values and objects have developed the culture of Zoe into an environment that is considered a second home for the mums who attend.

Like all things, Zoe began somewhere small, a dream to make a difference in a community where a social issue had been identified with the potential to impact many lives. The founding director Anne Webster, CEO, went to university, completed two degrees, and focused her social work honours paper on a needs assessment for teen mothers to complete secondary education in Mildura. The research findings informed the work of Zoe Support and the services it provides, but it offers more than originally intended, as Boronagh (a young mum) explains, 'it is a second home for young mums and kids, that's how I see Zoe, with all the support and everyone here, it feels like a big family'.

The future of Zoe Support is in its ability to create a sustainable model. Anne says to address the imperative of sustainability the centre is in the process of becoming a long day care centre, in order to generate revenue for the support services and increase capacity to meet present needs. A purpose-built facility is the only option for growth and the plans have already been drawn up. While governments at all levels have shown interest in the Zoe model, it will take continued energy, time and commitment to see the dream fulfilled. As one of the plaques at the centre says: 'Every great achievement starts with a decision to try', and that is what the Zoe team, and their mums, are doing.

**Anne Webster**  
Founding Director

**Katrina McGarry**  
Family Day Care Team Leader

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