

# Action research project at Hobart Family Relationship Centre

MICHAEL VOUMARD

**Service providers are increasingly expected to carry out some research and evaluation activities. Conducting large-scale experimental studies is extremely difficult in an agency environment—however some agencies are managing to undertake action research as part of their ongoing monitoring and development of service provision. In this article, Michael Voumard writes about how staff at the Hobart Family Relationship Centre (HFRC) used an action research approach to improve how they engage their clients who have children.**

“I wish they didn’t always argue about me—they don’t argue about anything else.”

“I want mum and dad to stop complaining about each other to me—I love them both!”

“Thank you for helping with our problems. You could put what I think into words.”

“Can we come back here again next week mum? You go and see the man and I’ll play with Emily again.”

“When mum and dad are upset with each other, first I cry in my heart and then I cry in my eyes.”

The above are quotes from some of the children who have been part of the life of the Hobart Family Relationship Centre (HFRC) since it opened in July 2006. They give a snapshot of the range of feelings expressed by children when they come through our doors. Some of the quotes are from children who have been seen by our specialist child consultant; some are from children who have been minded through adjunct care while one or both of their parents have been involved in family dispute resolution; some are from children who have talked with our first-point-of-contact staff—Client Services Workers (CSWs)—while they have been in one of our waiting areas.

## About the Hobart Family Relationship Centre

The HFRC is located in central Hobart in Macquarie Street. Macquarie Street is one of Hobart’s busiest roads, being the main road from central Hobart to the city’s eastern and northern suburbs. Traffic is constant—cars, service vehicles, taxis, logging trucks. It’s a noisy street.

From the outside, the Centre looks quite similar to its neighbouring buildings—two-storey, red brick, slate roof. Up two steps from street level, through a heavy wooden door, then a porch, then a glass door and then—from an adult’s point of view anyway—an oasis of quiet and calm. The old 1895 building, with ornate leadlight windows, timber staircase and lining and 12-foot ceilings, creates an ambience of peacefulness and solace.

If, however, we—as adults—get down on our hands and knees and approximate the perspective a young child might have, the Centre might look very different. For example, the front counter, a height suitable for an adult to lean on while they speak with the CSW, might present to a child as a high wall that they can’t even see the top of.

## The HFRC and research

The above provides a thumbnail sketch of the context in which work at the Centre occurs. It’s also the context in which action research at the Centre takes place. There are 8.8 full-time equivalent staff at the Centre; most of the current employees commenced at the same time—June 2006—so we’ve had the luxury of working together in a new field with a new team. Backgrounds vary—social work, psychotherapy, academia, psychology, law, mediation and customer service. All of us have a kind of curiosity about “how things work”, and add weight to the view that, if you’re curious, you can’t *not* do research.

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My own experience of a lifetime of action research—and something similar could easily apply to you—began when I was about 2 or 3 years old. It was a wintry Melbourne day, low clouds, no sun. With the guidance and encouragement of an elder sister, I threw a brick into the air, to see if I could make a hole for the sun to come through. In hindsight, the result was not too surprising—no hole in the cloud, merely a cut to my head, requiring a number of stitches—it was clearly a hypothesis that I observed a little too closely! And a decision that I won't do that again in a hurry!

This story carries with it the classic stages of the iterative process that we call action research: **observation** (It's a cloudy day), **reflection** (I don't like it when it's cloudy), **plan** (I'll throw the brick through the cloud to let the sun come through), **action** (I throw the brick), and back through to observation ... (My head hurts ... mummy...).

One action research question that the centre is particularly interested in is: **What would it take to integrate the best interests of children?**

We're interested in this for a number of reasons, one of which is that the "place" of children is one of the hot issues for regular Centre staff meetings (as well as being one of the hot issues in the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006*). One example is as follows:

I was coming downstairs from my office. I heard—and noticed—children in our waiting room. I also heard—and also noticed—a busy Client Services Worker (CSW) at the front reception desk. In addition, there were a number of distracted, waiting adult clients. In the presence of all this busy-ness, I thought it wisest to go back upstairs!

Twenty minutes later—after hearing that the coast was clear—I came back down to check in with the CSW ... "that looked pretty hectic". A further 25 or so minutes later, after listening to several compelling reasons why it was "just not appropriate" for the CSW to be put in that position, I made the suggestion to put it on the agenda for the next staff meeting.

At the staff meeting, conversations ranged to and fro—a number of personal preferences were expressed; a number of other organisations were cited for their practices. Gradually a consensus grew: "If the best interests of children are paramount for us, shouldn't we be the ones setting the benchmark? Isn't this an action research question?"

A couple of us agreed to take responsibility for going away to refine the question (an important skill as any researcher will tell you—get the question right!) We eventually came up with: **What would it take for the HFRC to better engage clients with children?**, as a sub-question of the question referred to above.

This question has now become a regular agenda item at our fortnightly staff meetings, where we monitor progress on how we are going in our action research in this area.

To date, the question has helped us realise that we need to gather data from a range of sources, including information from other Family Relationship Centres, a review of pertinent literature, and feedback from HFRC clients and service providers. We have also come up with a number of ideas that we think would assist in the engagement of clients with children. We have, to date, provided adjunct care to more than 100 children; we have engaged in an exercise in which staff have crawled around the Centre to experience a different (child-like) perspective of it; we are refurbishing our group room to become a child consulting room, complete with a canopy-type ceiling, small door for children, and child-appropriate furnishings (we will continue to use it as a group room and for Consortium and other meetings, thus giving a wide range of people the opportunity to become, for a short time anyway, more child-minded); we are planning a local research project using a case study approach aimed at exploring the impact on children of their mum or dad, or both, having an interaction with the Centre. This research will be reported in such a way as to give the reader a sense of how children view these things.

Action research, like any good research, raises many more issues to explore, at the same time as improving practice frameworks and outcomes for clients. We look forward to giving a further progress update in a future newsletter.

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