

National Evaluation in Brief

December 2008

Welcome to National Evaluation in Brief. This newsletter provides an update about the evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2004–2009. It includes links to publications and resources from evaluation projects and keeps you informed about the Promising Practice Profiles process. Some evaluation reports have been recently released. Others should be released progressively in the coming months.

UPDATE ON THE NATIONAL EVALUATION

The National Evaluation includes Communities for Children (CfC), Invest to Grow (ItG) and Local Answers. The evaluation was commissioned by FaHCSIA and prepared by the National Evaluation Consortium (Social Policy Research Centre [SPRC] at the University of New South Wales and the Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS]). We are almost to the end of the 4-year (2004–2008) evaluation. The final report of the evaluation is due with FaHCSIA this month and the department expects to follow its normal publishing guidelines and for the reports to be formally released in the first half of 2009. Other evaluation papers are being released as they finish the publishing process. *Engaging Fathers in Child and Family Services* was released on 9 December, as was the final report on the Promising Practice Profiles (PPP) process by AIFS on 4 December along with many of the project descriptions. Other thematic papers and the final reports will follow and be available on CAFCA and the departments website (www.fahcisia.gov.au).

The evaluation represents a very large effort from everyone involved and the consortium and department would like to thank everyone who has worked so hard to contribute.

STRONGER FAMILIES IN AUSTRALIA

The primary component of the evaluation of CfC outcomes was the Stronger Families in Australia (SFIA) study. It was a longitudinal, quantitative survey of families living in 10 CfC sites and 5 comparable communities (non-CfC sites known as “contrast sites”). The contrast sites provided a comparison group against which the impact of the CfC intervention could be estimated. The survey followed 2,202 children, aged 2 years at the time of the first wave of the survey, and their families over three periods of time (at the beginning of the CfC in 2006, and again in 2007 and 2008). SFIA achieved a very high level of engagement from families and children in the sites, which was excellent news for the evaluation. The SFIA work has been completed and is being considered for publication.

PROGRESS REPORTS—THEMED STUDIES

The evaluation included three thematic studies. One has recently been released with the others expected to follow soon.

Service Provision and Coordination for Indigenous Children and Families

SPRC has completed the Indigenous Families and Children Themed Study. This study aimed to identify the impact of the SFCS 2004–2009 on service provision and coordination in communities with high proportions of Indigenous children. It also examined some outcomes for Indigenous families and children living in CfC sites.

A literature review was conducted, along with 25 telephone interviews with people working in 12 CfC communities with high proportions of Indigenous families, 125 interviews with CfC stakeholders in 10 sites, 2 focus groups, analysis of 23 ItG evaluation reports and analysis of SFIA.

Many SFCS 2004–2009 programs were engaging and providing assistance to Indigenous children and families. Communities for Children increased the networking, coordination and collaboration between services and programs benefited from consultations and partnerships with Indigenous organisations and community members. However, these consultations took considerable time, and in many cases, the program timeframe was too short for services to establish effective partnerships. This was especially the case in rural and remote areas and when pre-existing relationships did not already exist.

One of the key findings was that Indigenous families and children increased their access to services and some were engaging with certain services for the first time. SFCS had not only increased the number, scope, quality and relevance of services available to Indigenous children and families in their areas, but also raised Indigenous people's awareness of services in their communities.

Engaging Hard-to-Reach Children and Families

SPRC has also recently completed a report on Engaging Hard-to-Reach Children and Families. This research looked at how, and how effectively, CfC, Local Answers and ItG projects engaged children and families that may be considered "hard to reach". It also examined the challenges projects faced, strategies that might help and the impact of CfC on hard-to-reach families and children.

A literature review, document analysis and 20 interviews with key stakeholders in a sample of 14 ItG and 6 Local Answers projects were conducted. Additional interview data was also collected during the 125 interviews conducted in 10 CfC sites.

Indigenous families were identified as the most hard to reach group, along with young parents, fathers, and those not using other services. Yet groups that are "hard to reach" depend on context. For example, in non-metropolitan settings, isolated families and those with transport difficulties are "hard to reach".

Who was "hard to reach" also depended on the target groups for each project and whether they had tailored services for particular groups of people. Programs targeting activities to the mainstream population tended to find several groups under-represented, including Indigenous people, young mothers, and fathers. Many targeting particular groups (such as culturally and linguistically diverse families or young parents) found subgroups "hard to reach" (for example, Afghan mothers or young fathers).

Several strategies were found to be useful to engage "hard to reach" families. These included: employing outreach workers, using soft entry points, and collaborating with services working more closely with target groups. Challenges unresolved by the SFCS model include inadequate time to effect change, and staff shortages or instability which could disrupt relationship building.

Engaging Fathers in Child and Family Services

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) has completed a project exploring father's engagement with SFCS-funded child and family services. This paper was released on 9 December as a FaHCSIA Occasional Paper (no 22) and can be found at <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/research/ops-ops22.htm>.

This study described father's participation in the SFCS and identified successful strategies for engaging with fathers in selected SFCS programs and services.

A survey on father engagement was sent to over 200 SFCS programs and services. Interviews with facilitators and focus groups with fathers were conducted for a selected sample of services and programs. The sample included services located in urban, rural, regional and remote locations across many states of Australia.

Key findings from the study were presented at the AIFS conference held in Melbourne in July 2008 (<http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/afrc10/abstracts-ah.html#berlyn>).

The researchers' found that although fathers were engaged in a diverse range of activities within the SFCS they participated less than mothers. Services that had a father focus were most successful at engaging with fathers.

Professionals and fathers reported benefits of father's involvement in the areas of child development, fathers' parenting skills and confidence, parent-child relationships and family relationships. Fathers were also perceived to benefit through building their social networks, and reducing social isolation. For the fathers who participated in focus groups, contact with services was a positive and valued experience.

While professionals felt that they encountered real barriers when trying to connect with fathers, many useful strategies for facilitating father engagement were identified. These included:

- introducing flexible hours of operation
- employing male facilitators
- developing father-specific services
- marketing services to men in male spaces
- using male-friendly language and advertisements
- creating service venues where men felt comfortable

Again, both FaHCSIA and the consortium would like to thank organisations and families who contributed to these papers.

PROMISING PRACTICE PROFILES (PPPs)

The Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (CAFCA) would like to thank project staff and local evaluators for submitting their practice material for consideration for the Promising Practice Profiles (PPP).

The PPP process has been highly successful. Submissions for the PPP process were made from all states and territories and across Communities for Children, Invest to Grow and Local Answers projects. Fifty-seven of the 81 proposals received have been validated by an independent Peer Review Panel as promising practices.

Although diverse, a number of common features could be discerned that were thought to contribute to program efficacy. These features will be highlighted in the Promising Practice Profiles, the final collection of which are being written up by consultants to ensure consistency of presentation and writing style.

Profiles are being completed and many are now being progressively released on the CAFCA website (see: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/ppp.html>). The final Promising Practice Profiles

report is now available on the CAFCA website at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/evaluation/pubs/pppfinalreport.pdf>. The report reviews the PPP process over the three rounds. It describes the validated promising practices and identifies the common features that were thought to contribute to program efficacy.

While the PPP was part of the evaluation of SFCS, the practice-based evidence on “what works, why and for whom” emerging from this process is widely applicable to community practice and services in general. This local evidence base will also be particularly useful for policymakers to enhance their understanding of effective practices for funding purposes.

The PPP Team would like to once again take this opportunity to thank all project managers and staff and Local Evaluators for taking part in the PPP process.

CHANGES TO THE CAFCA WEBSITE

In the coming months you will notice ongoing changes to the structure and appearance of the CAFCA website as we continue to support your important child and parenting activities. We'll be updating existing resources and adding new material to further support your efforts in providing evidence-based programs and services. The changes will include a new look, easier navigation and better search facilities.

Last but not least, we welcome your feedback and hope that you will take some time to let us know what you like about the website, how well it works for you and what you'd like to see more or less of. This will help us make the most of the opportunity we have to support you in your work.

RESOURCES & PUBLICATIONS

The SFCS National Evaluation page contains links to a range of resources, publications, and demographic data that SFCS participants may find useful: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/evaluation/sfcsevaluation.html>. In coming months, new material will be added to this section of the website.

CONTACT EVALUATION IN BRIEF

If you would like to contribute to *Evaluation in Brief*, contact Robyn Parker at CAFCA@aifs.gov.au