



National Evaluation in Brief

June 2009

Welcome to National Evaluation in Brief. This newsletter provides an update about the evaluation of the former Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2004 – 2009, links to publications and resources from evaluation projects, and keeps you informed about the Promising Practice Profiles and updates to the CAFCA website.

UPDATE ON THE NATIONAL EVALUATION

The evaluation of the former Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) is now complete and the National Evaluation Report has been released. Details are available on the evaluation publications page at: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/pubs.html>

Findings

Overall: SFCS Program

The SFCS successfully raised the profile across Australia of early intervention and the need for a coordinated approach to the early years, and successfully engaged families traditionally thought of as 'hard to reach'. However, the three programs of the SFCS were not well integrated.

Communities for Children (CfC)

Benefits were reported for services in terms of access, capacity, reach, coordination, innovation, and delivery. For clients, small but positive effects on outcomes for children, families and communities were found, and the participation of previously disengaged and 'hard to reach' groups increased.

Local Answers (LA)

Partnerships played an important role in the development and/or implementation of the projects, and positive attitudes among staff, positive relationships with clients, good local connections, client-focused approaches, partnerships, and training were reported by LA projects as success factors.

Invest to Grow (ItG)

Reporting of program outcomes varied significantly among the ItG evaluations in quantity, quality and comprehensiveness. All evaluation reports noted positive outcomes for children, parents and/or services (e.g. improved child behaviour, social, motor,

language and academic skills; improved family awareness of and access to services, and increased service collaboration with other agencies).

STRONGER FAMILIES IN AUSTRALIA (SFIA) study

The overarching aim of the SFIA evaluation study was to identify whether the CfC initiative had an impact on child, family and community-level outcomes and ascertain whether there were any differences in these outcomes for different groups of children.

The SFIA final report is now available. Details are available on the evaluation publications page at: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/pubs.html>

Findings

Overall, there is evidence that CfC programs had positive impacts in that:

- fewer children were living in a jobless household
- parents reported less hostile or harsh parenting practices
- parents felt more effective in their roles as parents.

There is some evidence of a negative impact on the mental health of mothers with low education (defined as Year 10 education or less), and poorer general health of mothers in relatively lower income households. It also appears that the CfC intervention was associated with parents reporting lower levels of child physical functioning. However, it is unclear whether this reflects an actual deterioration in child and parent health in CfC sites compared to children and parents in non-CfC sites.

The evaluation also examined the effectiveness of the CfC intervention for:

- hard-to-reach households
- households with low incomes (\$485 a week or less)
- households with mothers with low education (Year 10 or less).

The findings demonstrate that the CfC initiative had success in improving some outcomes among these families in relation to children's early receptive vocabulary and verbal ability, joblessness rates and mothers' involvement in community activities.

Overall, the size of the impact attributable to the CfC intervention (the 'effect size') were comparable to, if not greater than, many alternative early childhood interventions.

THEMED STUDIES

The former Stronger Families and Communities Strategy evaluation included three thematic studies:

- Indigenous Families and Children: Coordination and Provision of Services
- Engaging Hard-to-Reach Families and Children
- Engaging Fathers in Child and Family Services (published December 2008 at: <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/about/publicationsarticles/research/occasional/Pages/ops-ops22.aspx>)

Indigenous Children and Families

The Indigenous Families and Children research report examined the impact of the SFCS on service coordination and provision in communities with high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and through this tried to identify the impact the Strategy had on the lives of Indigenous children and families.

The report on Indigenous Families and Children has been released. Details are available on the evaluation publications page at: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/pubs.html>

Findings

The Indigenous Families and Children study found that:

- SFCS programs made a lot of progress in engaging and assisting Indigenous children and families.
- Consultations and partnerships with Indigenous organisations and community members were beneficial, but effective engagement can benefit from more time for relationship building, especially in rural and remote areas.
- Long-term funding is essential. Short-term programs can have a detrimental effect on Indigenous communities, and possibly fuel resentment and mistrust.
- Communities for Children programs increased the networking, coordination and collaboration between services but in many cases, the three-year SFCS program was too short for services to establish new partnerships.
- Many stakeholders believed that SFCS 2004–2009 increased the quality and relevance of services available to Indigenous families.
- The greatest reported changes were: 1: increased access to services; 2: increased first-time engagement with services by Indigenous families; and 3: raising Indigenous people's awareness of services in their communities.

If you have any feedback or questions on this study, please contact Saul Flaxman, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, ph 02 9385 7800, email s.flaxman@unsw.edu.au.

Engaging Hard-to-Reach Families and Children

The themed study report explores how CfC, ItG and LA projects and activities have engaged clients who may be considered 'hard to reach'. Using interviews with key informants in a sample of projects, the report examines how, and how effectively, services engaged 'hard to reach' populations. It also examines the challenges these projects face and looks at strategies that may help improve reach and engagement (for details see <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/pubs.html>).

Most of the participants from CfC, ItG and Local Answers identified Indigenous families as the most 'hard to reach' group, along with young parents, fathers, and those not using other services. Yet participant responses show that groups considered 'hard to reach' is context specific; that is, it is based on the community in which the project is conducted, the project's staff, and the groups that the project endeavours to target. Some participants, however, were reluctant to label any groups as hard-to-reach, feeling the label detracts from the notion that client engagement is a responsibility of services, not individuals.

Participants identified several strategies for engaging 'hard to reach' families:

1. intervention design and practice (ensuring interventions fulfil relevant needs in the community, effective outreach and promotion; ensuring non-stigmatising 'soft' entry points and the use of 'natural gathering places'; providing food and incentives; and spending the time required to build relationships with vulnerable groups);
2. networks and partnerships were important for identifying needs, finding and reaching clients, building capacity, and ensuring continuity; and
3. staffing (employing community members and ensuring staff were appropriately skilled).

Several challenges to reach and engagement remained, including:

- difficulty identifying and reaching clients, given their 'invisibility' in services and in the community;
- complexity of client need and circumstance (e.g. family breakdown, homelessness, lack of education, family violence and substance abuse);
- perceptions and social stigma as barriers to engagement, along with transport, especially in non-metropolitan areas;
- staffing (e.g. many services required outreach workers, there were ongoing difficulties in recruiting and retaining both generalist and specialist workers);
- the short term nature of funding hindered building relationships with 'hard to reach' groups; and
- time constraints (e.g. requiring additional time to build co-operation with local providers to increase service reach).

Overall effectiveness in engaging 'hard to reach' groups in SFCS projects

The Stronger Families in Australia (SFIA) study found CfC had a small but positive impact on both 'hard to reach' and other families. Furthermore, hard to reach families were more likely to participate in community activities of various types. Non-hard to reach parents, on the other hand, were much more likely to report increases in unmet service needs. This suggests that the efforts of CfC sites to engage with hard to reach families seems to have paid off.

PROMISING PRACTICE PROFILES (PPPs)

Round three of PPPs have been progressively published on the CAFCA website (see: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/topics/index.html>), with the final eight profiles going live on 19 June 2009.

Round four of PPPs are underway, with the Peer Review Panel reviewing a number of submissions. Feedback is currently being provided to projects.

The final report on the Promising Practice Profiles process and outcomes is available on the CAFCA website at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/evaluation/pubs/pppfinalreport.pdf>. The report reviews the PPP process over the first three rounds and describes the validated promising practices.

Promising Practice Profiles are a valuable source of practice-based evidence on “what works, why and for whom” that is widely applicable to community practice and services in general. The Profiles also enable policy makers to enhance their understanding of effective practices for funding purposes.

RESOURCES & PUBLICATIONS

The Publications page on the CAFCA website now contains everything you need to know about the former SFCS National Evaluation:
<http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/pubs.html#evaluation>

Project Reports

The following three projects have submitted reports that are available for others to access (<http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/pubs.html#evaluation>):

Goonellabah Transition Program: “Walking together, Learning together”

The Goonellabah Transition Program (GTP) is a flexible, holistic early learning program for children and families needing intensive support with transitioning from home and preschool settings into Kindergarten. The Report includes the evaluation strategy and results, and recommendations for future development of the program.

Turning the Evaluation Framework Upside Down: Highlighting the Outcomes for Children, Families and the Community

Like other Communities for Children project sites across the country, CfC workers in Broadmeadows, Victoria, developed an evaluation framework to guide the evaluation of their multifaceted, community-based intervention. In their final reporting, however, they wanted to communicate more than just the effectiveness of their activities. This paper outlines how the project managers turned the framework upside down to create a richer picture of the outcomes of the project.

Families of Offenders Resource Kit (FORK)

In late 2006, the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO) received funding from FaHCSIA to undertake a three-year project, the Families of Offenders Resource Kit (FORK). The project established working groups consisting of local services and families in eight different local areas, and developed a locally relevant resource kit outlining issues and strategies for supporting families of offenders. This summary report outlines the project and identifies key learnings and outcomes.

CONTACT NATIONAL EVALUATION IN BRIEF

If you have any queries about *National Evaluation in Brief*, contact Robyn Parker at cafca@aifs.gov.au