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Innovative methods for engaging disadvantaged families

Lessons from Promising Practice Profiles

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Outline

- Describe four themes or ‘principles’ that enhance the capacity of a service to engage disadvantaged families
- Provide some examples of how these principles have been implemented in innovative ways by child and family services in Australia
- Brief conclusions



Background

- National Strategy – better outcomes for children, families and their communities
- Evaluation of the strategy incorporated a range of methods including:
 - ◆ Longitudinal study;
 - ◆ themed studies;
 - ◆ Promising Practice Profiles
- Practice relevant resources based upon the evaluation findings = CAFCA Practice Sheets



Background (cont'd)

- Starting point for the Practice Sheet was the themed study by Cortis, Katz and Patulny (2008), entitled 'Engaging disadvantaged families'
- Promising Practice Profiles:
 - ◆ Descriptions of specific practices
 - ◆ Validated as 'promising' via a semi-blind validation process
- Process managed by the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (CAFCA)



Engaging families – what does it mean and why does it matter?

- Engagement = a positive relational bond
- Engagement with disadvantaged families can be challenging
- Families who are least likely to use child and family support are the same families that are most likely to need them



Key themes



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Go to where families are

- Families may not attend a program or service if it is unfamiliar, intimidating or in a location that is inconvenient to them
- Going to where families are, such as local shopping centres or parks, rather than waiting for families to attend a program or service, is a way of connecting with families and developing relationships with the local community



Promote & deliver services in a non-stigmatising & non-threatening way

- Families may be sensitive to the stigma associated with the concept of 'charity' or 'welfare'
- Families want to be seen as more than just their 'problems'
- Certain situations and environments can be threatening to some parents (e.g., young parents in a 'classroom' environment)



Employ strategies that empower families

- Could take a number of forms including encouraging parents to:
 - ◆ contribute to the planning and development of programs and/or individual sessions and working with parents to implement their ideas and suggestions;
 - ◆ take a facilitation or leadership role in a group (e.g., parenting mentor, playgroup facilitator) and supporting them in that role;
 - ◆ take up further educational and employment opportunities



Develop relationships

- With families: developing relationship of trust between practitioners & individual families critical to engagement
- With communities: families more likely to attend service if known within & recommended by key groups, agencies and/or families within community
- With other services: services working in isolation may not be able to meet the needs of families as effectively



Exploring themes



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Bilingual storytelling

- Outreach to playgroups, childcare centres, preschools, schools, festivals and events
- Story-time in 5 most common languages in area: Arabic, Turkish, Assyrian, Vietnamese, Singhalese
- Bilingual story-tellers
 - ◆ Well connected to community networks; develop relationships of trust within communities
 - ◆ Role models for women in the community



Partnerships with Parents

- Minimal paper work
- Workers are highly visible in the local community
- Working closely with local Aboriginal agencies:
 - ◆ Identify gaps and needs in the local community
 - ◆ Support local Aboriginal services
 - ◆ Seeking advice and guidance on cultural issues and sensitivities



Mobile Family Resource Centre

- Identify a location where parents meet (a walk-through area in a local shopping centre)
- A 'walk-up' service – there is no 'program' to attend
- Outreach to community events and early childhood activities in the library, playgroups
- Mobile capacity – 'out and about' in the community – seen by people in the community



Conclusions

- The themes/ 'principles' are:
 - ◆ not rocket science as concepts but may be difficult to implement
 - ◆ already being implemented by child and family services in Australia
 - ◆ adapted to suit the local population and their needs
 - ◆ relevant to practice with all families but especially important to disadvantaged families



Thanks!

- Have a look at the Promising Practice Profiles database for more examples!
<http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/ppp.html>
- Join CAFCA mailing list to receive CAFCA Practice Sheets
<http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/>



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