

Working with Families

A strengths-based approach

Adam Tomison

In recent years Australia, like many countries of the western world, has had to cope with ever-increasing reports of suspected child abuse and neglect. It is apparent that relatively few of the families reported to child protection services actually receive the counselling and support they need to make positive changes in their lives, and thus to reduce the risk of child maltreatment.

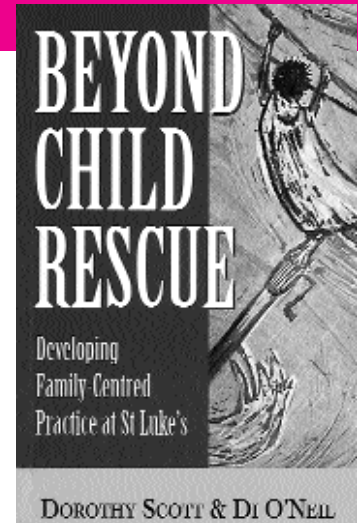
Given the acknowledged problems associated with removing children and placing them in out-of-home care, family support and child welfare agencies have attempted to develop alternative strategies that enable 'at risk' or maltreated children to remain safely in their families. *Beyond Child Rescue: Developing Family-Centred Practice at St Luke's*, by Dorothy Scott and Di O'Neill, describes one such strategy developed by St Luke's Family Care, a leading Australian child welfare agency situated in Bendigo, Victoria.

St Luke's Family Care is one of a number of agencies that have undertaken a radical shift in service delivery from primarily providing placement services to helping families to remain intact or ensuring their successful reunification with children in out-of-home care. Rather than adopt a traditional view of casework, described by Michael Durrant in the Foreword as the 'either/or' approach (that is, *either* removal of the child *or* family support), St Luke's has developed a 'both/and' perspective where out-of-home placement is viewed as part of a process of helping families remain together.

Over a period of eight years St Luke's has undergone a substantial reorganisation and made a significant shift in the way in which it engages and works with families. A competency-based, solution-focused approach to practice has been created where goals for family change are not imposed by the agency but developed in a cooperative relationship between a worker and family members. St Luke's Family Care has 'taken seriously the idea that the basic way we work with families should determine the structure of the agency, including its employment policies, staff organisation and supervision' (Durrant, p.xii).

Beyond Child Rescue describes the St Luke's approach in detail, providing an examination of the agency's history, the process of change it has undergone in the development of competency-based practice, and the skills and attitudes to practice which are crucial for success. The latter are highlighted in a number of detailed family case studies.

The authors do not claim to be introducing original concepts and note that many are merely commonsense. However, they contend that implementing a truly client-empowering program, such as that developed by St Luke's, is more difficult than it seems. *Beyond Child Rescue* is therefore designed as a guide for practitioners, providing a detailed description of St Luke's innovative adaptation of current practice wisdom in order to work more effectively with abusive families.



Allen & Unwin, 1996

The crux of St Luke's practice is the adoption of a strengths-based approach to working with families. The 'strengths perspective', pioneered in the early 1960s by Otto (for example 1963, as cited in DePanfilis and Wilson 1997), provides an alternative to the traditional emphasis of the helping professions on family problems and pathologies and the difficulties such an approach creates for practice (De Jong and Miller 1995).

The underlying tenet of a strengths perspective is that all families have strengths and capabilities. If practitioners take the time to identify and build on these qualities, rather than focusing on the correction of skills deficits or weaknesses, families are more likely to respond favourably to interventions and thus the likelihood of making a positive impact on the family unit is considerably enhanced (Dunst, Trivette and Deal 1988).

The practice philosophy of a strength-based approach, particularly as it is applied to 'at risk' and abusive populations

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(Saleebey 1992, as cited in De Jong and Miller 1995), can be summarised as:

- all people and environments possess strengths that can be marshalled to improve the quality of clients' lives; these strengths and the ways in which clients choose to apply them should be respected by workers;
- client motivation is fostered by a continued emphasis on client-defined strengths;
- discovering strengths requires a cooperative exploration between clients and workers;
- a focus on strengths reduces the worker temptation to 'blame the victim' and enables the discovery of the means by which clients have survived in even the most inhospitable of circumstances;
- all environments, even the most bleak, contain resources.

The authors are at pains to point out that a focus on the positive aspects of family functioning, as adopted by St Luke's, does not imply that family problems and/or the protection of the child are forgotten. Rather, the focus of family support work is on building family members' competence and self-esteem in order to tackle issues effectively. The objective is to develop a true partnership between family members and workers, involving the family as much as possible in case management decision-making and encouraging families both to

NEW PUBLICATION



from the

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Emotional Abuse: The Forgotten Form of Child Maltreatment is the working title of Issues Paper No.8, the next in the series of issues papers from the National Child Protection Clearing House at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Written by Adam Tomison, Research Advisor to the Clearing House, and Joe Tucci, Executive Director of Australians Against Child Abuse, this paper describes the current state of knowledge surrounding the relatively neglected area of the emotional abuse of children.

Emotional abuse is increasingly considered to be the core issue in all forms of child abuse and neglect, yet until recently it has received little specific attention and is the least studied of all forms of child maltreatment. Research into the impact and prevalence of this form of abuse is seemingly plagued with disagreements about how to define it, measure it and treat it.

Tomison and Tucci describe the history and development of definitions of emotional abuse, paying particular attention to comparing and contrasting emotional and psychological abuse.

The paper includes overviews of research investigating aspects of emotional abuse – specifically, children's witnessing of spousal violence, the mislabelling of child maltreatment cases as emotional abuse, and the traumatising of children in out-of-home-care.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the prevention of emotional abuse and an outline of some future directions for research.

Issue Paper No.8 will be available in October 1997, and is free of charge. To add your name to the mailing list to receive this and other publications from the National Child Protection Clearing House, fill in the application form below.

set their own goals and to take responsibility for achieving them.

Competency-based, family-centred practice is therefore not a denial of a family's problems or shortcomings but a focus on client strengths as a more fruitful means to

address issues and achieve positive change. Giving more credence to clients as participants in the helping process increases the likelihood of a worker facilitating positive change in the lives of family members, and helps to ensure the safety of the child through better engagement with the family. As the authors note, the St Luke's approach is not a 'total fix'. Rather, it is designed to *assist* families to achieve a level of functioning above the threshold for protective intervention.

The book uses family case studies as the basis for a discussion of the therapeutic process which underpins the St Luke's experience. Scott and O'Neill also describe



6th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect

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For further details see Conference Workshop Circuit p.61

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a number of issues that have arisen in practice: for example, methods of working effectively with statutory clients, and the implications of the involvement of child protection services in case management. The final chapter, 'Challenges for family-centred practice', is particularly useful, combining both practice wisdom and the current research literature to describe in greater detail some of the issues and challenges confronting family support services in general, and more specifically, those which have had an effect on the St Luke's approach.

An important sub-theme highlighted by the authors is the importance of valuing workers and ensuring that their needs are met as an integral part of a competency-based approach. Scott and O'Neill discuss career paths, training and cross-training programs, supervision and the importance of worker feedback and input into the St Luke's program design.

Overall, *Beyond Child Rescue* is a clear, easy-to-read text ideal for the agency or practitioner contemplating alternative, client-empowering approaches to working with abusive or 'at risk' families. The authors have effectively described St Luke's competency-based, solution-focused approach to practice. In addition, they have summarised the changes undergone by the agency, firmly placing these changes within the historical context of the welfare system's response to children and their families.

As the authors note, the St Luke's practice model may not be ideal or replicable in other settings, however, the underlying philosophy and principles are certainly worthy of consideration. Certainly, there has been growing recognition in child protection and child welfare practice of the need to develop such a 'strengths perspective' in case management (De Jong & Miller 1995). As Durrant notes, St Luke's has 'examined its essential beliefs about people, families and children and has tried to build a practice that flows from those beliefs. This is revolutionary' (p.xii).

References

- De Jong, P. & Miller, S.D. (1995), 'How to interview for client strengths', *Social Work*, vol.40, no.6, pp.729-36.
- DePanfilis, D. & Wilson, C. (1997), 'Child protective services: applying the strengths perspective with maltreating families', *The APSAC Advisor*, vol.9, no.3, pp.15-20.
- Dunst, C.J., Trivette, C.M. & Deal, A.G. (1988), *Enabling and Empowering Families: Principles and Guidelines for Practice*, Brookline Books, Cambridge, MA.

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Picture: Double Jay Graphic Design

Costs of Children in Australia

There are two important differences between results obtained by using the basket-of-goods method and the expenditure survey method as presented in the accompanying Tables. First, the basket-of-goods approach provides only part of the cost of a child, while the expenditure survey measures the total amount spent on the child. Second, the basket-of-goods method indicates how much parents would spend on their children if the child was to enjoy the fruits of the basket specified by the researcher. In this sense, it provides an 'ideal' or desirable costing. In contrast, the expenditure survey method indicates how much parents actually spend on their children, even though the amount spent might be considered inadequate or excessive by the objective standards of the basket-of-goods method.

Basket-of-Goods Approach Based on Lovering 1983 Adjusted to CPI figure December Quarter 1996					
	2 years	Age of child 5 years	8 years	11 years	Teenage
<i>Low income families</i> (below average weekly wage)					
Per week	31.90	40.92	50.20	53.22	79.29
Per year	1663.64	2172.13	2616.47	2776.68	4134.63
<i>Middle income families</i> (average weekly wage and above)					
Per week	47.99	53.83	69.50	89.97	131.92
Per year	2502.51	2808.80	3623.70	4574.80	6878.92

Note: Included are food and clothing, fuel, household provisions, costs of schooling (not fees), gifts, pocket money and entertainment. NOT included are housing, transport, school fees or uniforms, child care, medical or dental expenses. Holidays are a component of the middle income figures only.
Source: Lovering, K. (1984), Cost of Children in Australia, Working Paper no.8, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Expenditure Survey Approach Based on Lee 1989 Adjusted to AWE figure December Quarter 1996								
Age of child (years)	Food	Transport	Recreation	Household goods	Housing and utilities	Clothing	Other*	Total expenditure weekly
0-1	31.33	46.24	32.11	31.91	25.78	17.38	17.28	202.14
2-4	27.56	35.92	25.65	29.42	16.51	15.26	14.84	165.37
5-7	29.04	37.45	38.61	26.58	20.85	17.64	11.71	178.86
8-10	40.54	52.17	38.85	27.94	14.09	16.29	25.69	215.76
11-13	44.68	44.26	36.18	31.02	29.98	23.56	30.07	239.91

* Includes medical and dental costs, education costs and other miscellaneous costs. Costs of children vary according to the number of children in the family, the parents' incomes and whether one or both parents are working.
Note: The figures in the table relate to a one-child, one-income family with an income of \$679.80 gross per week. The Lee data show that two children cost about 55 per cent more than one child, while three children cost about twice the cost of one child. The dollar costs of children are relatively 'flat' compared with rises in family income: children in poor families cost proportionally more, and children in rich families proportionally less than those in middle income families.
Source: Lee, D. (1989), Calculations of the direct costs of children based on the 1984 ABS Household Expenditure Survey, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

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