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In recent years there has been a greater recognition of the need to evaluate child abuse prevention programs, with more professionals attempting to implement program evaluations with some degree of methodological rigour. However, relatively little is known about the effectiveness of current child abuse prevention initiatives. In part, this is due to difficulties in applying experimental techniques to the realities of providing services to families.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies, in partnership with Burgell Consulting, recently evaluated one secondary prevention pilot program – the Brimbank Family Outreach Service – located in the City of Brimbank, Western Metropolitan region of Melbourne, under the auspices of the Brimbank Community Health Service. (In April 1998, Brimbank Community Health Services amalgamated with Westgate Community Health and Community Health Wyndham, to form ISIS Primary Care.)



Picture: Andrew Chapman

Brimbank Family Outreach Service

The Brimbank Family Outreach Service was designed to provide support and advice to 'at risk' families not currently identified as abusive, to reduce the problems of at risk families in order to prevent them becoming child protection clients, and to reduce the need of such

families for the provision of significant family support resources. The support role involved: assessing child and family needs; developing caseplans; ensuring appropriate services to address the family's needs; and where possible deflecting people from the secondary and tertiary service sectors through early

identification, early intervention and timely treatment.

In order to engage effectively and work collaboratively with families and other agencies, the Service's case practice focused on child centred family focused practice and effective interagency coordination, collaboration and communication. A cornerstone of its role was to approach families as a 'friendly visitor' in order to engage with and assist families to resolve or reduce the issues or problems they were affecting their health and wellbeing. The Service model is currently being implemented across Victoria, as the 'Strengthening Families' initiative.

In the 12 months of operation, 157 children and their families from the City of Brimbank local government area were referred to the Service for assessment and case planning. The client families had identified concerns in relation to family functioning, parental discipline practices, childrearing practices, poverty and/or environmental neglect, rather than actual harm or abuse of the children.

The research

The major design features of the evaluation were:

- the development of a preferred case management approach (undertaken by Burgell Consulting), based on the

← For details see overleaf

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Australian Institute of Family Studies, 300 Queen Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000 Australia.
Phone: (03) 9214 7888. Fax: (03) 9214 7839. Internet: <http://www.aifs.org.au/>

results of focus groups with local workers and a survey-based assessment of the local service resources and case management practice;

- a three-month case tracking study (undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies) centred on the Brimbank Family Outreach Service, where a sample of cases were tracked from the Service to a number of other services who had been previously identified as playing a significant role in the case management of Brimbank Family Outreach Service cases;
- and a client feedback survey (undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies), designed to tap client families' perceptions of their experiences of the Service during the tracking period; this was distributed by Service workers during the case tracking period to those families where the Service had had an ongoing involvement (more than one visit).

The direct evaluation of the role of the Service was based on the collection of the perceptions of its own workers, other agencies' workers, and some of the families the Service attempted to assist. The family feedback and case tracking components of the evaluation developed much of this data.

Evidence collected via the case tracking and family feedback components indicated that the Service had more than adequately fulfilled the tasks of case coordination and planning, developing solutions for at risk families in a manner perceived by other agencies' workers and the families themselves as being very effective.

Brimbank Family Outreach Service was perceived by other workers as: positively affecting the exchange of information on client families and service issues between agencies; enhancing interagency communication and collaboration; and providing an effective, flexible approach to family support.

Other workers perceived families to have benefited from the Service's involvement because of: the better engagement and rapport that was established, which in turn led to greater family cooperation and a better case outcome; and the case coordination and planning done by the Service (which enhanced family functioning).



Picture: Howard Birnstihl

Although a small sample, the feedback provided by families was consistently positive, with the majority of families rating the Service very positively across a number of dimensions, and indicating that its staff had adhered to the principles of child centred family focused case practice.

Case Management Framework

Using the results of the focus groups and the analysis of the wider service network, (carried out via the survey of the local service resources and case management practice), an interagency Case Management Framework was developed by Burgell Consulting. It was designed, in part, as a measure to assist the Service or similar agencies to exercise a bridging role between statutory government services and non-government agency networks. This framework was compatible with existing agency practice formats, acting as a supplement to established agency procedures and practices.

The Framework describes a number of protocols and work practices which would enhance interagency collaboration, focusing specifically on:

- interagency communication (and the development of uniform interagency procedures and protocols);
- cross-cultural practice (taking a cross-cultural approach to assessment and service intervention, including an understanding of the role of culturally-specific factors in determining child abuse, the risk of abuse and the appropriate intervention); and
- risk assessment (the active monitoring and regular review of child safety and

an assessment of the risk of child abuse through all stages of the case management process).

Findings

Overall, the program evaluation demonstrated that the Brimbank Family Outreach Service played a significant, highly constructive role in the assessment and case management of at risk families who did not require statutory intervention. In the past, such families have often not received the treatment or support they required to deal with their issues and/or to prevent the occurrence of child abuse and neglect. The Service was able to develop and provide effective support for these client families, decreasing the probability of the families becoming abusive, or entering the statutory child protection system.

In addition, the Service made a clear, positive impact on interagency communication and coordination throughout the local service network. The Case Management Framework which was developed, should provide a basis for effective interagency work as part of the 'Strengthening Families' programs. It is reported that further work refining the Case Management Framework is currently being undertaken by the Department of Human Services prior to its application as part of 'Strengthening Families'.

Finally, the research team made a series of recommendations in the context of the Service being implemented as the 'Strengthening Families' initiative; these are provided in the full Evaluation Report.

The Evaluation Report and a companion document, the Brimbank Research Report, are available from the Department of Human Services Victoria. The reports are titled as follows:

Mackieson, P. (1997), *Brimbank Family Outreach Program: A Research Report*, Department of Human Services (Western Metropolitan Region), Melbourne.

Tomison, A.M., Burgell, R. & Burgell, D. (1998), *An Evaluation of the Brimbank Family Outreach Service*, Department of Human Services (Western Metropolitan Region), Melbourne.