



Early Intervention Parenting Program

CONSTANCE JENKIN AND PAT JEWELL discuss an early intervention program aimed at making a positive contribution to the ways professionals in community agencies work with children aged up to five years.

Introduction to the first two years

At the beginning of 2001, Parenting Australia (under the auspice of Jesuit Social Services) was successful in a tender bid to the Family and Relationships Branch of the Australian Government's Department of Family and Community Services, under their Child Abuse Prevention Program to fund a parenting program. The model focuses on prevention of child abuse by early intervention and will build on existing parenting programs that support families and young children.

The aims of the Early Intervention Parenting Program were as follows:

- to enable parent information and support to be more accessible to all families, but in particular vulnerable families;
- to assist workers in agencies to understand the needs of vulnerable families and be able to design and adapt parent programs to suit the needs of these families;
- to encourage agencies to incorporate and use more group work with parents to reduce feelings of isolation and build the strengths of vulnerable families; and
- to improve ways of working with families in community agencies.

The project offers:

- training to ensure that the method of delivery and the content of parenting programs focuses on: building the confidence of parents; allowing discussion; providing relevant useful information; and enhancing family relationships to ensure that children grow in a family atmosphere of respect, love, optimism and hope.
- the opportunity to build on the expertise and understanding of agencies and individuals already working with young children and families within a local area.
- linkages between agencies that presently offer the services of counselling to parenting groups to meet the needs of the families with more serious problems.
- the parenting manual "Planning Happy Families" written by Constance Jenkin provided the philosophy on which the training was based and on which the parenting programs would be facilitated.
- evaluation of the process and outcomes of the project.

The project began in May 2001 with two geographical areas identified by the Department of Family and Community Services as high-risk areas for families of young children. The areas identified were the La Trobe Valley region in South East Victoria and the outer Northern metropolitan region of Melbourne. In the second year of the project, two other geographical areas outer western region and East Gippsland were identified.

The coordinators

A coordinator was chosen in each of the four geographical regions. The role of the coordinator in each of the regions was essential to the project. Coordinators were employed by the project to oversee the training and support for the parent programs that followed.

The training

Three-day training was provided using a strengths-based and solution-focused philosophy that enhanced skills and knowledge of the participants.

Research and evaluation

The evaluation was undertaken by Dr Gay Ochiltree, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne. The evaluation process consisted of a pre- and post-training evaluation filled in by the facilitators attending the training. The parent group facilitators used a diary to capture the richness of the parent group content and participation. Parents also completed pre- and post evaluations on the course content and processes.

The parent groups

There was a wide range of parent groups that were undertaken in the first year. All parent groups focused on parents with children 0 to 5 years.

These include: parent groups for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families; families struggling with domestic violence; parents with an intellectual disability; parents of children with additional needs; families in temporary crisis housing; and parents from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

In year 2, the parent groups were just as diverse including: parents in prison; parents who are living in isolated situations; Vietnamese parents; and Aboriginal grandparents.

Some of the barriers to successful engagement of parents were: difficulties with advertising; engaging parents when you do not already have a relationship with them; time to organise the group on top of heavy workloads; arranging child care – venue and personnel; and a suitable venue.

The groups that were easier to get off the ground were those where the professionals already had a relationship with the parents or where the participant was part of a network that could access parents that is, Maternal and Child Health Nurses.

The outcomes of the project

For parents

There was no doubt that the parents, once engaged in the parent groups were very happy with the group process.

To the question “What was the best thing about attending the program?” responses included: learnt new approaches to children (30 per cent); learnt other parents have similar problems to me (27 per cent); and meeting other parents (26 per cent).

To the question “Why did parents attend the groups?” responses included: wanted to be a better parent (47 per cent); wanted to learn about child development and behaviour (23 per cent); and to meet other parents (16 per cent).

For the participants and coordinators

At the end of the second year of the project it was becoming obvious that there were some exciting “ripple effects”, including increased understanding of resilience and parenting that transferred to other areas of the facilitators’ work and personal lives. These ripple effects were captured in this later evaluation through telephone interviews with coordinators and facilitators, questionnaires to targeted participants and some site visits.

Year 3 of the project

The project received funding for another year and was to have two aspects.

Part one was the opportunity for the evaluator to follow up with participants and the coordinators: to capture the exciting “ripple effects” being identified after the end of the project; to provide funding for facilitators who did not get their parent group going; and to provide funding for facilitators who had enough parents for a second parent group.

Part two was to trial the model within the Aboriginal communities in the Warrnambool area.

In part one the evaluator used a qualitative approach including: telephone interviews with the four coordinators; short questionnaires sent out to facilitators; and telephone interviews with some facilitators.

All four coordinators were happy to be interviewed and some of their comments about the project include:

- “it built on the core business of the organisation”;
- “it provided an opportunity to connect with other related services in the region and to network”;
- “it gave coordinators the chance to get to know professionals from other services”;
- “it gave coordinators the opportunity to assess the professional quality of the participants who took part in the project”;
- “it brought people out of the woodwork”;

- “it provided experience in project management”; and
- “it gave the coordinators a professional boost”.

Two of the facilitators recognised that they had enough parents to facilitate another group each. Facilitating a second group offered the facilitators the opportunity to build on their skills and expertise obtained in their first group. One facilitator, who was unable to facilitate her group in the first part of the project, found that the gap in time between participating in the training and finally facilitating the parent group daunting. However once the group began, with weekly telephone support from the project, the facilitator reported feeling satisfied with the success of her group.

Exploration of the Early Intervention Parenting Program model in the Warrnambool area

Background

The Aboriginal communities in the Warrnambool region do not receive adequate services because of their low numbers of child abuse notification. In order to maintain this good record, the Department of Family and Community Services recommended that early intervention services would ensure that the status quo remained.

Plan of action

To engage influential local community leaders to promote and assist in the training of community members to deliver parent support groups using the Early Intervention Parenting Program model.

Three Aboriginal communities were identified in the region. These are: Gunditjmara – in Warrnambool; Framlingham Trust – 15 minutes outside Warrnambool; and Winda Mara – at Heywood.

The project ended up working with the Winda Mara community which identified the need for training with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood workers. This process began with a meeting of the potential training participants and the community coordinator. At this meeting the workers decided on the content and purpose of the training.

From the training the early childhood workers agreed to:

- talk to the parents in the playgroup about coming together at Lake Condor on the last Friday of the month;
- send a survey out to parents about topics they might want to discuss at the monthly Friday sessions; and
- meet and work out who would do what at the parent sessions – in the training we planned the first session they would do.

Progress to date

Progress to date is that: a playgroup that was struggling to function has been able to attract new members; the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood workers involved with the playgroups feel more confident to work with parents within the playgroups; and parents from three playgroups have successfully met together and shared parenting information at Lake Condor.

Conclusion

This 3-year project has yielded many successful results but there are many parents still not accessing parent groups.

Some follow up questions include:

- do parents know about the groups and choose not to attend? Why?;
- are parents unaware of parent groups and their value?; and
- are there other reasons?

Parenting Australia has now received funding for another three years (2004 – 2007) through the Responding Early Assisting Children (REACH) initiative to explore a much bigger question.

What would happen if, instead of trying to engage families who do not access services, these families were identified and we tried to create a safe supporting community around them?

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IMPORTANT REMINDER!

To be included on the new mailing list you need to let us know by 30 September 2005. You can do this by filling in the online form at www.aifs.gov.au/nch/survey05/survey or by mailing or faxing the enclosed survey to: Ellen Fish, National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 300 Queen Street, Melbourne, VIC 3000.