

Why use action research?

An action research approach helps tailor projects to local situations. Put simply, it asks what works – how, when, where, for whom, and with what outcomes.

Community programs and projects have often been evaluated using traditional “objective”, scientific methods. An outside person, such as an auditor or an external evaluator, may come in and assess the program. They may use surveys or other measures developed elsewhere, and they may compare results with another group of people – called a control group – to see whether those who took part in the program are different from those who did not.

More recently, there has been a growing use of an action research approach to evaluate programs. This approach uses a range of research methods, and is as its name suggests – tied in to action or change in programs. It is a dynamic, flexible process that is able to look at a program and learn and inform the program while it is being carried out, rather than at the end when the program is finished.

This approach involves stakeholders as participants in the process, and is flexible enough to take account of the differences that may exist both between and within communities. It helps tailor projects to local situations. Put simply, it asks what works, how, when, where, for whom and with what outcomes. It starts with where projects are at and builds on them, asking what is important about what is happening and why, and what do we want to learn.



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Rather than using surveys or statistics or comparing one group with another, the practitioners of action research are more likely to value and interpret people's experiences and stories (although action research may still include surveys and statistics or other scientific research methods if they suit the project). It is generally agreed that more traditional approaches cannot achieve the

insights that come from people's experiences. Stories add colour, character and a new culture to the evaluation process (Crane and Richardson 2000).

Action research has a varied history: it has roots both in management theory around organisational change (Lewin 1946) and in methods for teaching literacy in South America in a way that empowered local people to act to change their lives (Freire 1972a, 1972b). It has been particularly important for people working in a range of fields throughout the world who see research as essentially linked to social change (Alston and Bowles 1998).

Action research, used as an evaluation method, is sensitive to local, environmental and social contexts. It finds ways to involve and value the contributions of everybody who has a stake in the program – for example, participants and their families, workers, local agency manage-



ments, community members, local services, and government and non-governmental organisations. It is an approach that helps build partnerships between stakeholders, and bring in others, such as local businesses, which can make a contribution. This kind of involvement is integral to the evaluation.

These kinds of partnerships mean families and communities can work together to develop the best ways of taking care of the needs of families, particularly those with young children. Together with developing these skills is the desire to prevent the development of social problems (also called “early intervention”).

A partnership approach seeks to find out and recognise the strengths and abilities families and communities already have, and build on them so they can have more control over decision-making for issues that affect them, are more able to help themselves, and have a sense of community. Developing these kind of collaborative community early intervention strategies also helps build the kinds of individuals and communities that are able to tackle other problems as they come along. In other words, they build community capacity to address local issues (see article on community capacity building elsewhere in this Bulletin).

Some strategies will be more successful than others, but in the Stronger Families Fund, less successful strategies will not be regarded as failures. Understanding not only what worked, but also what didn't work, will be important in developing knowledge about early intervention approaches. Projects will be asked to report on

Action research

Action research contributes to a process of reflective practice, which encourages continuous improvement.

What is action research?

- Action research is tied to action or change.
- Action research usually involves everybody who has a stake – it is participatory and collaborative.
- Action research happens in cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, starting with small questions, with the aim of understanding about the local situation to increase over time.

- Action research is mainly qualitative – that is, gathering stories rather than statistics.

What is an action research evaluation?

- An action research evaluation uses action research principles to evaluate projects as they go along, instead of just at the end.
- An action research evaluation means that what projects learn from evaluating as they go along, allows them to change direction if needed.



the insights gained in applying their strategies, and share these reports with other projects as a means of generating good practice for the Stronger Families Fund and the wider field of early intervention and prevention.

Key questions for the Stronger Families Fund as a whole might be: "What makes early childhood programs effective, in a variety of contexts, for diverse participants and stakeholders ranging from children, through parents and community members to policy makers?" "What are the keys to effectiveness that may have been known but not visible or documented until now?" "What lessons have been learned during the project?" (The Effectiveness Initiative 2001).

References

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Early intervention and prevention

The evidence base underpinning family and community policy

In recent years, there has been a great deal of research into the way human beings develop, especially in the first five years of life.

It has been recognised for some time that children need to form good attachment to their carers in order to become healthy, productive adults. It has only recently been discovered, however, that patterns of attachment are "hard wired" into the brain during the early years.

In other words, the more positive stimulation a baby has, the more brain cells – as well as the number of connections between those brain cells – are encouraged to develop.

Lack of stimulation, on the other hand, or negative stresses can result in poor brain development so that babies who have been neglected or abused are more likely to grow up experiencing poor physical and mental health, drug and alcohol dependence, a lower standard of education, unemployment and crime.

It is suggested that the rapid social and economic changes taking place may also be contributing to these problems by placing both families and communities under heavy stress. The burden and costs of these problems are enormous and they increase over time. The most effective way to address these problems is early, before they become firmly entrenched.

Along with the research into brain development, there has also been significant international research into the way early intervention and prevention services can help nurture growth during the early years. Prevention averts problems before they arise. Early intervention catches problems early – either early in a child's life, or at early stages in the development of problem situations.

The Commonwealth Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is based on the above assumptions. It has used national and international research to support the notions that:

- families have strengths that can be built on;
- families require advice and support, particularly in times of transition;
- strong communities are characterised by networks that create opportunities for their members and protect vulnerable people;
- strong communities support families, and vice versa; and
- a focus on early intervention and prevention is more effective in the long-term than responding to crises.

Early intervention services which have proven to be effective include:

- home visiting to pregnant women and families with new babies;
- parenting skills training;
- family relationship education;
- family counselling;
- awareness raising about services and resources available in local communities; and
- support services for families with very young children, such as playgroups that provide opportunities for play-based problem solving which helps stimulate brain development.

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is working at both the family and community level through a set of early intervention and prevention projects and initiatives to build resilience so that families can break the cycle and deal with issues before they turn into problems. These activities are based on:

- strength-based approaches which enhance and build on strengths rather than focusing on deficits;
- action learning as a process of reflective practice or ongoing evaluation which leads to continuous improvement; and
- evidence-based practice building on national and international knowledge and research.

The families initiatives in the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy include the Early Intervention Parenting and Relationship Initiative, the Stronger Families Fund, and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. The Longitudinal Study is managed nationally while funding through first two initiatives is managed by the State and Territory office network of the Department of Family and Community Services.

Community groups can access the funds to:

- provide services – for example, parenting programs such as home visiting, playgroups, and parenting skills training, as well as relationship skills training and counselling in remote areas;
- resource communities to adapt their own approaches to generic programs; and
- coordinate existing services to make sure they reach the people who need them.

For further information about these services, contact the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy hotline toll-free on 1800 300 125.