

FAMILIES NOW, BEENLEIGH

Bulletin questions for third round projects

06/03/03

by Marita Holt, Co-ordinator

1 What has the project been doing in the last six months (the last Bulletin)

Plans are under way for our first Communication Camp, designed to build trusting relationships and communication skills between parents and children. We are looking at having the first one in June 2003.

Families NOW have presented both Parenting and Home Budgeting Courses in the local community with significant numbers attending the courses. We have also had community and government organisations contact the team at Families NOW wanting us to run the courses for their clients. For example the Migrant Resource Centre, Community Corrections and the Department of Families.

We have been busy organising sponsorship and community involvement in a Family Fun Day to be held in Brisbane on the 29th of March. We participated in the event last year and apart from having a load of fun we found the event to be very resourceful. We make up show bags to give to parents for them to hold all their information in while they look around.

March saw us launch our video. The video is designed to generate interest and knowledge on what we do in the community and how community organisations can get involved. It identifies the work we are doing in the community and how we are going about it.

Over the past six months Families NOW has been busy building a strong core of volunteers.

2. How has the project incorporated Action Research into its work?

Families NOW has incorporated Action Research into our work by forming three reference groups: a volunteer reference group, a client reference group and a community reference advisory group. Each group has regular meetings either every month or every three months. Staff (myself and the workshop facilitators) and volunteers keep reflective journals. We meet weekly with parenting and budgeting workshop facilitators to look at improving workshops in accordance with their insights and client feedback as they go, and responding to needs for follow-up activities.

We are currently conducting an action research cycle on volunteers. This cycle involved current volunteers contacting past volunteers and inviting them to join the reference group and discuss the role of volunteers within Families NOW. We wanted to identify past issues and address them in order to improve the volunteer system. We have also implemented a suggestion box for volunteers to voice concerns, improvements and needs etc.

What we do differently because of action research? Volunteers expressed a need to take on more responsibility and more defined roles, so we developed five different roles they can fill for periods of two to three months. We initially recruit volunteers as Family Support Workers, and later they have the freedom to choose another role in which to further develop their skills. For example our Volunteer Research Officer looks at action research and different cycles, our playroom supervisor is in charge of the themes of the playroom and the activities for the children. With every volunteer

role I have provided the volunteers with a reflective journal whereby they write what project they are working on and how they are going about it, and any reflections for change. This also means the information and knowledge is not lost should the volunteer be unable to continue in the role and somebody else has to take it over.

Once a week the coordinator and the volunteer research officer have phone contact with our AIFS project worker which prompts and encourages reflection and gives us a reflective space. We discuss with the Management Committee and consult with our volunteers and facilitators any needs that are identified by clients and we try and modify our services as needed.

3. How is the project recording its processes and learning (including but not only action research)

Families NOW record our processes and learnings through action research cycles, for example on Volunteers and our Your Opinion Matters Workshop with clients, held in July last year (see Bulletin 2 for a report on what we learnt). Our cycle on volunteers involved surveying past volunteers over the phone and through written surveys.

We encourage our volunteers to review volunteer policies and procedures and reflect on desired changes and act to implement them. This can be done through reflective journaling and reporting to the Management committee through monthly reports.

Workshop facilitators also keep reflective journals to inform practice.

4. What's been learned in the last six months that may be of interest and value to other projects ?

We have learnt that volunteers work better and are more committed if they have a specific role to which they are suited, access to training to learn new skills, and an interest in working in the field, for example if they are studying welfare, psychology or community work. We have found that empowering volunteers in a voluntary capacity also empowers volunteers in their own lives.

We have also learnt that tailoring parenting and budgeting courses to meet the needs of clients and families is important in the success of the courses. Adding to the course content all the time also adds to the success for course participants.