

'Parents are invincible superheroes'

This article is drawn from an interview by SFLEX team members Colleen Turner and Ellen Fish with members of the Enfield Community Advisory Group. The Group comprises 17 parents of children under 12 years and has been the driving force of a Stronger Families Fund project at Enfield, Adelaide SA.

We began by asking about their experiences of parenting, especially in the early years while the children were still babies.

As might be expected there was a diversity of experience. Two mothers talked about the difficulties of bringing home babies who had been born prematurely and had become used to the constant noise of a hospital environment. Both babies had taken quite a while to get used to the relative quiet of home.

Several mothers expanded on the anxiety of having a child with health problems, and made the point that they felt more anxious about having some time away from children who had been more fragile.

One member mentioned the need to 'multi task' or, in her words, 'become an octopus' – hold the baby, make the dinner, vacuum the floor. There was much nodding and smiling in general agreement to this comment. Someone else commented that parents – both mothers and fathers – were 'invincible superheroes'.

As a group we explored the question of support for parents in the early days.

Many of the group had found their family, particularly their mother and aunts, very helpful. They also noted that any experience of looking after children as part of an extended family or friendship group was good parent training. Others had found networks of people in the same situation helpful, for example, play groups or mothers' groups.



However, the group agreed it was important that those supports were encouraging and supportive, and not bossy. It was important that there be consistency and a good relationship with professionals who provide support to parents and families – whether they are nurses, teachers or other forms of family support.

Several people said that one of the most important supports was the opportunity to take a break from the kids occasionally. For some people that meant a supportive mother-in-law who would care for the children while parents had a weekend away; for others it was occasional child care while they went shopping. One mother commented that it was important for parents, and mothers particularly, to 'maintain a separate identity as a person'.

This led us to a discussion of bonding and building relationships with children. The importance of a strong attachment between primary caregiver and child is central to the early childhood intervention field.

Some parents found their children were happy to 'run off' to child care

or school, while other children preferred to stay close to their mothers. Many of the mothers in the group also felt some 'separation anxiety', especially with children who were inclined to have health problems. Attachment workshops where parents could do interesting and fun activities with their babies as part of the project (for example, singing and massage) were outlined by the Child and Youth Health Worker.

The remainder of the discussion was concerned with how this group of parenting experts had developed and shaped the Enfield project, and what they thought were the essential elements in working productively with parents in developing projects to meet family needs.

We started by asking: Why are you part of this Community Advisory Group?

Members of the group were enthusiastic about the benefits to them personally of being part of the group. Those benefits included:

- enjoying sharing their own stories, diverse backgrounds and skills;
- being able to learn from one another;
- guiding an important community project;
- being accepted 'as is';
- tapping into something that you are good at (parenting and participating in community life/work);



The authors would like to thank those interviewed for their time and insights. Members of the Enfield Community Advisory Group who took part in this interview were: Suzie Gowen, Helen Edwards, Leah Coulthard, Jodie Daniels, Leanne Hutchins, Kylie Charles, Vivienne Prigent, Leah Hardwicks, Jan Watkins and Daniel McKenzie. Lyn Whitcher is responsible for project administration, Chris Rippon is Child and Youth Health Worker attached to the project and Leah De Zen is the Project Coordinator.

- feeling useful and constructive in helping other people;
- finally, and of no less importance, the group ‘clicking as one’.

What are you most proud of about the work/achievements of this project?

The group mentioned many of the wide range of activities undertaken by the craft group, which have seen parents trained in, and passing on skills such as, face painting and kite making – skills that small children consider essential in a good parent. The ‘new parents’ groups were also noted. However, the most important achievements related to what one mother named ‘seeing our community improve’.

How can you tell that the community has been improving?

The group responded that parents (especially mothers) will now ask for help. This was an important

achievement as the group had agreed earlier that as new parents they had often not felt able to ask for advice or help. They noted that lots of parents and children were now coming into the project office, and that an important part of the project was that it followed up people with needs. As one mother said, ‘they don’t just let them hang’.

A special mention was also made of fathers who had been an active part of the project.

The group gave a couple of specific examples of how the project had improved their community. A newly arrived immigrant family had ‘nothing’, and the community, via the project, had been able to meet most of their needs for furniture and other household essentials. The group felt this was important because as someone said, ‘we have all been there and know how it feels’!

Group members also made a point of telling their extended community about the project. This has meant that the advisory group continues to attract new members who might otherwise have been too shy to join. Sometimes this process has had unexpected benefits: for example, a local bank donated \$200 when someone told them about the project.

It is important to the group and to the community that the project is ongoing for at least a couple of years, so that there is time to develop some consistency and to extend the project activities further. An outline of the work of the Enfield Project is provided in the project section of this Bulletin.

The project is currently in the process of designing and developing a community centre from a currently unused child care centre next to the school.

