



Stronger Families
Learning Exchange

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The Stronger Families Learning Exchange is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. It provides information, resource sharing, training and advice on family wellbeing, primary prevention and early intervention, and services Stronger Families Fund projects and a larger network of people concerned with strengthening families and communities.

Australian Institute of Family Studies provides a clearinghouse for strengthening Australian families and action research support for Stronger Families Fund projects.

The objectives of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX) are to contribute to the evidence base about the effectiveness of early interventions for families, and to support the work of Stronger Families Fund projects.

Views expressed in SFLEX publications are those of individual authors and may not reflect Department or Institute policy.

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Australian Institute
of Family Studies

300 Queen Street
Melbourne 3000 Australia
Phone (03) 9214 7888
Fax (03) 9214 7839
Email strongerfamilies@aifs.gov.au
Internet www.aifs.gov.au/sf/index.html

Designed by Double Jay Graphic Design
Logo developed from artwork by Louise Kyriakou
Printed by Impact Printing
ISSN 1446-8549

Print Post Approved 381624/02083

Stronger Families Learning Exchange

Where we're at

This is the third Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX) Bulletin published by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The Stronger Families Learning Exchange project, undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, is funded by the Department of Family and Community Services as part of the Commonwealth Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. Its aim is to contribute to the formation of an evidence base from which to inform policy, practice and research in strengthening families and communities.

The project includes two main elements:

- a clearinghouse which collects and then disseminates the latest information on research and programs concerned with family wellbeing, primary prevention and early intervention; and,
- a training and support team which serves Stronger Families Fund projects.

The Clearinghouse

Information about the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, the SFLEX project, project contact details, online resources and links, and relevant conferences and workshops can be obtained in the first instance via the SFLEX website at: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/sf>. A Help Desk is also staffed during business hours to respond to queries, and to search databases upon request (Tel: 03 9214 7888 or Email: fic@aifs.gov.au).

The Clearinghouse arm of the project has established a substantial collection – to date over 3000 items – of Australian and international resources on research, practice and policy related to the strengthening families subject area. This includes: family strengths; action research; community



JUDY ADAMS

development/capacity building; resilience; parenting/parent education; early intervention; primary prevention; and early childhood. A catalogue of Clearinghouse resources can be accessed via the website or people without Internet access can phone the Help Desk for catalogue printouts.

The website also contains a database of early childhood early intervention projects. Early intervention activities target individuals or groups who may be at risk of developing problems or are exposed to potentially harmful environments. The criterion for inclusion is progress towards 'good practice' or 'what works'. Managers of early childhood early intervention projects are being asked to contribute to the database. If you would like to share information about your project with others in the field, please get in touch with us.

The Stronger Families Fund

The Stronger Families Fund initiative of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy funds community-based projects to find ways of strengthening family functioning. Particular emphasis is placed on projects seeking to explore strategies that promote early childhood development and effective parenting. Each project is assigned a member of the SFLEX Training and Support Team to assist them to undertake an action research evaluation.

The projects are run in a variety of geographical settings – urban, rural and remote – and offer the following services or mix of services:

- Direct service delivery – child care assistance; breakfast programs or nutrition support; counselling; crisis support; linking/referral to other services; health care; and coordination of agency assistance.

- Preventive education and training – parenting skills; budgeting courses; literacy programs; computing; first aid; awareness raising/information provision; health promotion; relationship skills; violence prevention; and awareness raising about other community services.
- Community building – play groups; peer support groups; projects that strengthen support networks; community gardens; and drop-in centres.

See pages 18 to 28 for the latest project news.

SFLEX Training and Support Team

The Training and Support Team is now working with 46 Stronger Families Fund projects. Work was also undertaken towards developing and running the SFLEX National Workshop (Melbourne, 1–3 April 2003), which was a very successful event. Information on the conference will be included in the next Bulletin.

The Team's action research support role was also highlighted in the 8th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, held in Melbourne from 12–14 February 2003, with the theme *Steps Forward for Families: Research, Practice and Policy*. The Team (with the involvement of the Wagga Wagga project and Gai Stern from the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services), ran both a symposium and action research methods workshop (see page 11 for further details).

A number of staff changes have also occurred since the last SFLEX Bulletin. In late 2002, Dr Kelley Johnson took over the role of Team Leader of the SFLEX Training and Support Team. Kelley is now responsible for all day-to-day operations of the Team; Adam Tomison remains involved as Manager.

The Team would also like to welcome two new members: Lisa Natoli and Katrina Bredhauer (they introduce themselves on pages 31–32). Finally, it should also be noted that Dr Sandra Billard, who made a valuable contribution to SFLEX as a contracted consultant for the SFLEX Team through much of 2002, has now completed her assignment. We would all like to thank Sandra for her great contribution and wish her well with her future endeavours.

Judy Adams is Manager of the Clearing-house arm of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX) at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The Elephant *and*



Action Research

Kelley Johnson

When I think about action research I often think of a poem which I read at school. A group of blind men from Hindustan encountered their first elephant. One touched its trunk and thought the animal was a hose, another touched its tail and thought it was a mop and another touched its side and thought it was a wall. Bring any group of action researchers together and like the blind men they start to talk about their very different perceptions of what they do.

All of these may be right but may only partly describe the animal. Among the different ways action research has been used are: as a tool for making research relevant to social change (Lewin 1948); as a radical means of empowering people to take political action against oppression (Freire 1972); and as a means for managers to reflect on their practice (Greenwood & Lewin 1998).

The metaphor of the elephant and action research seems particularly relevant when considering the Stronger Families Fund projects and our work as members of the Training and Support Team in working with them. Each of the projects and each member of the team knows something of the total picture, and each of us brings different skills and experience to the work.

The Training and Support Team has knowledge and expertise in action research and in working with projects somewhat similar to the Stronger Families Fund projects. Project participants and workers know their community and needs and may have skills in working in action research and/or community development. Each person works in a different environment with different people, and uses a range of different strategies to achieve the project goals. Further, each project has developed using action research in different ways. ▶