

The Stronger Families Fund

From vision to methodology to practice

This paper was developed from a symposium of the same name presented at the 8th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference in February 2003. The paper combines the work of LEAH ANDERSON, Connecting Families project, Wagga Wagga; GAI STERN, Department of Family and Community Services; and COLLEEN TURNER, SFLEX.



In April 2000, the Commonwealth Government launched the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS). Its brief was to strengthen families and communities across Australia using early intervention and capacity building approaches. The SFCS is based on a set of principles which encourage communities to develop their own responses to local issues; build partnerships; integrate service delivery; and build evidence about what works to inform future policy. The Strategy is made up of a number of initiatives, one of which is the Stronger Families Fund (SFF).

The SFF provides the means for around 40 communities across Australia to make a real difference by improving the way they deliver services for families in their area. SFF projects support parents and families in their role of caring for young children in a variety of ways. Essentially, they operate as local hubs or central points for family and children's services. While each project is unique, they have all been designed by communities in response to local needs to strengthen families and increase resilience through prevention, early intervention and capacity building. This generally involves building on existing strengths making use of infrastructure already in place, identifying gaps in service delivery and bringing in services that are needed. This results in the development of partnerships and networks and the integration of local services.

The SFF provides hands-on support for the projects to set up action research methodologies so that they are equipped to work in a reflective way and collect data which is meaningful to them, as well as being interesting and useful for the wider community. This support is provided through the Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX), based at the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) in Melbourne.

The Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX)

The Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX, for short), funded under the Commonwealth Stronger Families and Communities Strategy's Stronger Families Fund, has been set up to contribute to the growing body of Australian evidence about various approaches to strengthening families and communities.

The SFLEX has two distinct roles. One, through the Action Research Training and Support Team, is to help projects build structures that encourage good practice at the local level. The other is to collect and analyse information and data about early intervention and family and community strengthening, and to make it available through the Stronger Families Clearinghouse.

The Action Research Training and Support Team

SFLEX incorporates a philosophy of participation from those involved at all levels of its work. On this basis, each of the SFF projects has been encouraged by its action research worker to develop participatory bodies and processes that include community members. As a result, a wide range of community participation models have been developed and adopted which reflect characteristics of the community in which they are based and the design of the project.

In practice, the Team assists each of the projects to individualise their approach to action research and data collection. A team of ten people works with projects to design action research approaches enabling them to engage in processes of continuous evaluation and improvement. This provides the structure for projects to work with awareness about what they are doing, as well as a framework for them to network

and learn from each other. Action research approaches include the projects documenting what they do.

The Team also works with the projects to ensure that they are collecting appropriate data for reporting and evaluation purposes. This data is then analysed by the SFLEX and made publicly available through the Stronger Families Clearinghouse.

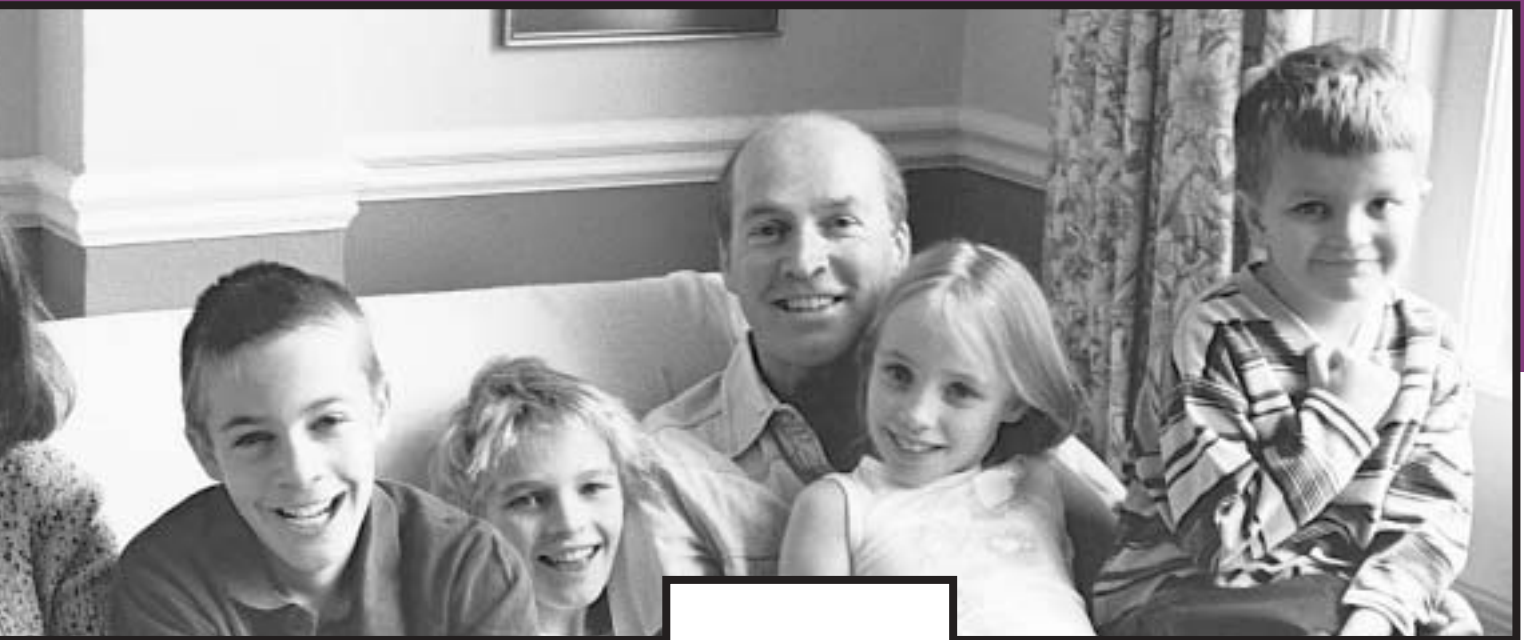
The Stronger Families Clearinghouse

The Clearinghouse is a repository for the 'evidence base' used to inform policy, practice and research. It provides access to resources on community development, early intervention and prevention, and action research through regular printed and electronic bulletins, a website and a help desk. The website provides information on Government initiatives relating to families and communities, early intervention and action research projects in Australia and links to Australian and overseas websites. It also contains electronic versions of SFLEX publications and news of forthcoming conferences and events.

Early learnings and insights

At all levels – departmentally, within the Clearinghouse, SFLEX Team and across all of the projects – it is reported that the work we are involved in takes time. It takes time to develop and refine the approaches, and then for the projects to engage with their communities and begin their long-term work. The SFLEX has also taken time to develop and operationalise its work. In addition:

- It is clear that the cyclical recording and reflecting on their processes helps projects to become more self-aware and proactive.
- Many projects are concentrating on building community participation and ownership into their work.



■ Projects are identifying a range of practical learnings that are useful to share with other projects. For instance, parenting workshops are more credible for parents if facilitators are also parents. Another learning is that a safe and comfortable workspace for project workers also enhances communication with community members.

Action research approaches are being used at both individual and overall project levels and in planning and evaluating individual activities within each project.

A Stronger Families Fund project in practice

There are around 40 Stronger Family Fund (SFF) projects. One of these, 'Connecting Families', is based in Wagga Wagga, NSW. In their 1998 Social Plan, the Wagga Wagga City Council identified social isolation as a major issue for families in the surrounding region. This isolation is understood to occur because of the transient nature of the population, lack of extended family networks and lack of public transport from rural villages. An associated issue is the difficulty of coordinating effectively existing child and family support services.

The Council applied for funding under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy and, as a result, the 'Connecting Families' project commenced in April 2002. It has been funded for two years to employ a project officer four days a week, and is auspiced by the Wagga Wagga City Council. The targeted areas for this project are seven rural townships surrounding the City of Wagga.

The aim of the project is to strengthen local families, with a particular emphasis on families with young children. Project personnel work with each of the town-

ships to identify their support needs and develop community-driven strategies for meeting these needs. The project encourages flexibility, to create solutions unique to each township.

The flexibility and sensitivity of the action research approach to the subtleties of the local context, has proven to be critical to the success of the Connecting Families project.

Outcomes

The Connecting Families project worked with each of the townships to develop an understanding of existing community networks, key individuals, resources and needs. A mapping document was then formulated, outlining the resources of the seven communities, the needs of each and a description of relevant features. This revealed that each of the townships had specific needs that required an individualised approach, in contrast to earlier assumptions of commonality across the rural villages and the suburbs.

Further development, following community discussion, allowed the adoption of different models for each of the communities. For example, Family Fun Days have been instituted as icebreakers, or ways of engaging with communities. These have varied though most have included supervised activities for kids, providing respite for families, as well as film nights and sausage sizzles. Once communication has been established, the Connecting Families project worker has been able to

develop specific approaches for each of the rural townships. Consequently, each of the seven communities now provides its own strategy. These include:

- Establishing a supported playgroup through the employment of a part-time childcare worker to facilitate activities for children, disseminate information and provide referrals;
- Setting up a Mothers' Group through the Playgroups Association – this is run by mothers without the assistance of a childcare worker;
- Running activities using a range of workers from various local agencies;
- Setting up a tennis club to provide opportunities for social interaction – this is likely to result in the establishment of a volunteer home-visiting scheme;
- Encouraging Country Women's Association members to come to existing playgroups to share information and provide time out for mothers. The two groups are also working together to develop community events e.g. fundraising;
- Using the local mobile preschool as a base for bringing visiting service providers from Wagga to playgroups. Agencies (e.g. the family support agency or clinics run by early childhood nurses) will alternate on a monthly basis; and
- Providing a regular playgroup and support network for farming communities using the existing Albury Farms model.

The Connecting Families project has tapped into the expertise of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange for support in providing action research backup, a sounding board for project development and guidance in interpreting the results of real-life trials for future projects.

