

Stronger Families Fund Longest Running Projects

Reflect on their Progress

Families NOW, Ashmont Community Resource Centre and Enfield Early Learning Centre have each featured in the last two Bulletins. In this edited report they discuss their progress and the role action research has played. Full reports are available on the web at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/sf/sffprojects.html>.

Compiled by Colleen Turner (SFLEX), Marita Holt (Families NOW),
Therese Reid (Ashmont) and Leah de Zen (Enfield)

Families NOW has established an information desk for families adjacent to the Family Assistance Office at Beenleigh Centrelink, south of Brisbane. Families NOW provides information such as tip sheets on parenting and family issues, support and referral for families, a playroom for children, and parenting and budgeting courses for parents.

Ashmont Community Resource Centre is a community-based family therapy centre providing services to the community of Ashmont, with the aim of strengthening and supporting parents and families.

Enfield Early Learning Service provides support in health care and education for families with children in the areas around the Enfield Primary School in Adelaide, South Australia.

What have the projects been doing since the report in the last Bulletin?

The projects have common threads in terms of the work they are doing in their communities. All three projects have been working in collaboration and consultation with other providers of family services in their area. Two projects, Enfield and Families NOW, are located within broader agencies where parents and children are likely to congregate. Families NOW operates from within a busy Centrelink office and Enfield is part of an equally busy primary school.

Ashmont Community Resource Centre has its own building and has been very successful in encouraging service providers to outreach to the more isolated members of its community. Likewise, Enfield is in the process of developing practical partnerships with Child and Youth Health Services (which provides maternal and child health services).

All three agencies offer an informal, inclusive and safe place for families to visit and seek help or advice, and/or tap into education or support programs. Their collaborative relationship with service providers means that the three agencies are each in a position to link families and individuals in crisis into appropriate services. This responsiveness is a factor in establishing community trust.

All three projects have been providing education and development programs for families in their areas. Some of these have been developed and facilitated by the project workers. Many have been held in collaboration with local experts. Some programs have developed into ongoing support groups, such as new parent programs and playgroups. The range of programs is very broad:

- How to drug proof your children;
- Domestic violence legal workshop;
- 1,2,3 Magic parenting program;
- Advice clinic and family law workshop;
- Parenting teens;
- Homecare elders craft;
- Parents as teachers (play/craft for mums and under-five children);
- Family budgeting programs;
- Afghani playgroup at a local pre-school;
- New parents;
- Managing challenging behaviours in children;



- Craft workshops;
- Kite building;
- Sewing, cooking and face-painting workshops;
- Learning computers;
- Aboriginal dancing; and,
- First aid.

The three projects have also had a strong focus on engaging with the communities to which they belong, using a variety of methods. Families NOW has been developing its reference groups as well as skilling up and developing its volunteers. Enfield Early Learning Service has been focusing on empowering and developing its Community Advisory Group as the Project's main planning group. Ashmont Community Resource Centre has been encouraging its community to make the best use of the drop-in facility.

All three projects have been active in organising and participating in local community events, for example, NAIDOC Day, a project launch and family fun days.

How has the project incorporated action research into its work, and how is the project generally recording its processes and learnings?

The projects all use action research as a planning and evaluation tool. Ashmont Community Resource Centre has incorporated action research by reflecting on the outcomes of previous programs, and gleaned useful information to plan for future programs. It also actively consults with its community, through surveys and local meetings to choose appropriate

education programs for the Centre to coordinate. Families NOW has used action research in a number of ways to develop its volunteer processes.

Enfield Early Learning Service has concentrated on skilling and empowering its Community Advisory Group. The governance model helps to support a flow of information between the community, service providers and project partners. Parents sit in on management meetings with senior managers of local organisations and, increasingly, are becoming more confident to speak out. This process has helped to facilitate a number of changes in service delivery. All projects have established reference groups (Families NOW and Enfield have three each!). Each project has different roles for its advisory or reference group, but all find them to be a valuable source of ideas, inspiration and direction.

All projects use a diverse mix of recording and information-gathering processes, including innovative visual presentations such as photographs and videos, as well as more conventional methods such as surveys, evaluation forms and formal questionnaires.

Enfield and Families NOW both use reflective journals as a way of incorporating action research and documenting the work of their projects. Enfield utilises a more collective approach, with one project journal, a working document, used to record all activities. The journal includes photographs, written reflections,

records of planning and evaluation results. Parents, service providers, project partners and children all contribute to this journal.

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 instance, 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.' (Families NOW)

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

'We have found that, even if research clearly supports a particular community need, and we target the particular group who identified this as a need, it does not necessarily mean that we will automatically get participant numbers to fulfil the program. For example, we distributed a survey and found that people wanted to quit smoking. We engaged the services of the community health service to run the program. We advertised widely, including to the people who initially showed interest, yet no one came to the workshop.' (Ashmont)

'It takes time and hard work to become known and trusted within a local area. We are finally starting to reap the benefits of putting in a lot of early groundwork and gaining the trust in the community.' (Ashmont)

'Encouraging local families to solve local issues and problems is a powerful way to build community strengths. Families in Enfield have responded extremely well to being encouraged to tap into their own strengths and to participate in something that makes them feel good about themselves. Families have been incredibly generous in donating time and resources as many have only the bare minimum



themselves. They have rallied for community support and encouraged parents to work together.' (Enfield)

'Establishing the support of upper management personnel is primary in helping to break down barriers. Including parents in this process helps share and feed back information. Maintaining positive role modelling throughout the whole process is important in reinforcing new behaviours. Creating a welcoming, non-judgemental, flexible environment is the key to engaging parents. Creating strong service provider networks is important in helping to follow up on parents' issues and offer back-up support. Although attending meetings and presentations is time consuming, it is an important way of creating connections with individual workers and improving communication between service providers. Often great work can come from two like-minded workers connecting from different organisations, but unfortunately it often isn't sustained, due to workers moving on. One of the themes that came out of the community consultation was that parents were tired of being referred to and from organisations, and wished they could develop connections with one worker who could follow up their issues.' (Enfield)

'Volunteers expressed a need to take on more responsibility and more defined roles, so we have 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, while 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 in which they write about their project, how they are going about it, and any suggestions for change. Compiling the journal also means that 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.' (Families NOW)

Stronger Families Learning Exchange Staff

Introducing more members



KELLEY JOHNSON

Training and Support Team Leader

What do you most enjoy about working in the Stronger Families Learning Exchange team?

I have now been team leader for about three months and am finding working with this team really exciting and interesting. We all come from very different backgrounds and contribute widely diverse views and ideas. Journeys out to projects in Queensland and to Western Australia have been both rewarding and really motivating.

What do you hope to learn from working in the team?

I think the Stronger Families Fund projects and the work of the SFLEX team give a great opportunity to explore how action research can be used in a variety of different contexts. I have worked for a long time as an action researcher, but I am learning a lot here about how to

support others to do action research. I am also learning a great deal about practice and am reviewing my ideas about theory too.

What is your contribution to the team project?

I have worked in action research in a number of different places and with different groups, including people with disabilities, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and in women's health. I have also taught action research methods in post-secondary education. So I bring this background with me to contribute to the work of the team. I am interested in exploring good ways of supporting people to do action research in their own communities, and ways of including people in meaningful ways in the work.



LISA NATOLI

Training & Support Team member

What do you most enjoy about working in the SFLEX project?

I have a real passion for community-based projects, so the opportunity to be exposed to such a range of terrific projects, staff and communities is a real drawcard. I particularly enjoy being challenged by the diversity of the projects, their differing needs for support and the need for me to be resourceful and to think on my feet!

What do you hope to learn from working in the team?

The Training & Support team is a melting pot of interesting people with equally interesting and varied skills, experiences and methods of working. I hope that I will be able to learn from these differing approaches and knowledge bases to complement the support I can offer to my projects.