

# Working with families *to empower families*

There is a well-known saying that “no man (or woman or child) is an island”. Often families feel as if that is exactly where they are stranded. Whether you call this “island” isolation, disconnection or exclusion, the inability of families to access community support can exacerbate, within the family unit, a sense hopelessness or lack of control, and may result in a breakdown of family functioning, causing problems that can spiral into a crisis.

The Children’s Welfare Association, my organisation, knows about families. We have been the peak body in Victoria for 90 years and have 85 child and family service organisations as members such as Anglicare, Berry Street Victoria, MacKillop Family Services, Salvation Army, Uniting Care Connections, local government services, and many medium and small size organisations across Victoria. Most of our members are concerned not just with providing safe “out of home care” placements for children, but with working with the families who are at risk of state intervention, and those already in the child protection system.

It is widely acknowledged that the child protection system is unwieldy and crisis focused rather than prevention and early intervention focused. Slowly, in response to this dilemma, new strategies and approaches are evolving for working with families who have complex problems requiring ongoing family support.

Together we need to work effectively to support families early on in decision-making, not just about internal matters but about the services they use and the policies that affect them. If we can improve family connectedness both internally and with the outside community, we can assist in enhancing

family functioning, and can reduce the need for state intervention in family lives. Hopefully, over time government and community together can move to create a system where support is available for families much earlier than at present, and eventually we can lower the 37,000 notifications that are made to child protection in Victoria each year. We know that 60 per cent of these notifications become re-notifications to child protection, indicating that there is an acute need for effective early and ongoing intervention and family support for these parents.

Australia has a great diversity and richness of family formation, with the nuclear family becoming less and less considered to be the norm. It is important that we involve and support families who are suffering poverty, exclusion or isolation, to make positive decisions at all the levels that affect their lives, and to examine constantly how we can do this more effectively.

Don Edgar (2000: 10) has defined the essential tasks of the family as:

- earning a living to provide adequate housing, food and quality of life;
- caring for family members (children, the old, and the disabled) and for oneself and (if in a partnership) one’s partner; and

- socialising children into the norms of the society in which they will have to operate as competent future citizens.

Edgar (2000: 10) goes on to say that “in today’s society, the capacity of individual families to cope autonomously (if they ever did) is increasingly undermined . . . all families need support across the life course in order to nurture the next generation, and care for the last, moderately well”.

## The excluded family

Much of Stronger Families Fund work will focus on what has been called the “excluded family”. These include:

- families not well engaged in the major social supports within their community, and not engaged in the service network (for example, families who have come from other countries);
- families disconnected from extended families, neighbours and friends (for example: a family that has experienced frequent movements through the housing system for a long time); and
- families excluded from the community because of negative perceptions within the community (for example, a family with substance abuse and poverty issues).



FAST Program, Daly River, Northern Territory

These most vulnerable of families are often unable to access the resources offered by the outside world to help them. Why? Often it can be because they are overwhelmingly concerned with surviving day-to-day. Perhaps because they don't know how to access resources, or don't know of their existence, or they lack the confidence to do so. Perhaps, having had previous bad experiences with institutions, they lack trust in formal services, fear outside intervention, and worry about what asking for support might entail.

We need to find ways to involve these families in decision making, and ways to try to build a connection between this type of family and the community. We need to provide a map and

a guide from their isolation and sense of hopelessness and fatalism about the future to a more positive landscape. Hopefully we will do this before the problems being experienced by the family degenerate to crisis point. If this is not possible, then we need to be prepared to hang in with them for the long haul out of the maze and back onto pathways to help, services and community networks.

If we can work early and effectively with families to facilitate their participation in decision making we should find that families may: experience positive long-term effects on their confidence and self-esteem; feel empowered rather than helpless; sustain positive changes and a connection with outside

support services and/or community; improve long-term health and the wellbeing of children; and help reduce incidences of societal violence.

### **What do we need to do to strengthen families?**

It is the two-way relationship between the worker and the family that is the key to successful outcomes.

- We need to be open and authentic as we seek to bridge the cultural divide, acknowledging our own prejudices.
- The importance of transparency was highlighted by the findings of The Evaluation of the Strengthening Families Victorian Initiative (Spice Consulting; 2001). Families



who were being referred to the Strengthening Families programs were least likely to continue an engagement if there was a lack of collaboration, communication and information about the referral from the beginning. Families needed to be made aware of the source of the referral and the reasons.

- There is never any substitute for understanding and compassion. We need to understand what the family motivations are, how the family perceives the outside world and their sense of how change could occur for them.
- All families need respect and an acknowledgment that each family has had individual pressures and factors that has led them to the point that they are at.
- Every family has some strength that we can build on.

There are many other skills we could talk about today. Most of all we need to understand, respect and appreciate the unique circumstances of each family and be aware of families' financial position, socio-economic status, medical and health issues, education and literacy, and any supports the family may or may not have.

And so the list goes on. We all need a high ability to be flexible and innovative and to think on the run. We need an extensive knowledge of the services available, how they can help and how they can be accessed. Often families need this kind of practical help most of all. It is also important to support families while they are accessing these services, to act as a sounding board and to ensure there is a significant person who provides a linkage for feedback and support. Often a solid grassroots service will achieve a level of success with a particular family only to find then that on referral a model is used that is too rigid and linear and the family experiences alienation and may drop out of the service system.

In Australia we have much to do to ensure that our services and programs extend out to work with Aboriginal first families. We need to take the time to be culturally aware of what is important for them. There are excellent organisations and resources

around to help us as we become aware and reach out to form local liaisons and build relationships with the Aboriginal services and families in our areas.

We need also to be culturally sensitive and aware of the amazing diversity of families that now constitute our Australia. It is great if we have workers with similar background to the families we work with but this is not always possible. However, we can all avoid making assumptions about cultures and endeavour to find as much information as possible about specific cultures and then remember that each culture has its own range of diversity within it.

## Conclusion

I know that time and resources are seriously limited, but nevertheless in the work we do it is good to keep the "gold standard" up ahead of us as we try and meet a myriad of different needs. I feel that I am probably "teaching my grandmother to suck eggs" in talking to you. I know that most of you are experts who have excellent, innovative and effective programs that make a world of difference in the lives of families.

However, in my now quite long career in working with families and children I have found that I need to be reminded of these things again and again. Family work is not easy and, although the skills to work with families may appear simple, we know that in practice they are truly challenging.

I wish each of you the very best in the work you do. Nothing is more important than the wellbeing of families and the children they raise – now and for our future.

## References

- Edgar, D. (2000), *Promoting the Positive*, Policy and Practice Research Unit, Deakin Human Services Australia, Melbourne.
- SPICE Consulting (2001), *Evaluation of Strengthening Families Initiative, Volume 1: Main Report*, SPICE Consulting, Surrey Hills.

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