

# Coming together . . .

## Introducing the national workshop for Stronger Families Fund projects

**Kelley Johnson**

It sounded like a relatively easy task. Representatives from 46 projects were to come to Melbourne for a three-day workshop. It was all due to happen three months after I started work as team leader for the Stronger Families Fund Training and Support Team, at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. I knew that planning had started in 2002 for the workshop. However, although I had been involved in other large workshops I had no idea how complex the preparation for this one would be, and how exciting and exhausting the workshop itself would prove to be for all of us.

This article outlines the processes of the workshop and the way it was run. It follows an action research cycle of planning acting, observing and reflecting. It also introduces you to this fourth Stronger Families *Bulletin* which focuses on the papers and resources used as part of the workshop. We hope that it will prove useful to other people planning similar events.

### Planning the workshop

Planning for the workshop began late in 2002. The decision was made to hold the workshop in Melbourne. In retrospect, this was a good choice for such a large workshop – our resources for the workshop were close by and we could draw on the skills and experience of other people at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and also on some of our own networks in the local community sector.

But this was the easy part of planning. Managing the logistics of bringing so many people to one place proved to be an enormous task. Because many of the projects are in remote areas, multiple travel bookings



Registration at the SFF National Workshop, Melbourne, April 2003

often had to be made. Taxi vouchers had to be purchased and accommodation booked. Claims for expenses then had to be registered with the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS). *Lisa Natoli*, who took most of the responsibility for this part of the workshop, showed an increasing tendency to flee her office each time the phone rang and there was a bubbling sense of urgency as the time got closer!

We wanted the workshop to be collaborative, reflecting the partnership between the Institute, FaCS and the projects. We advertised the workshop early, asked projects what they wanted, and then set up a small reference group. The latter proved to be a very positive move. Members of the reference group were helpful in designing the workshop program, some facilitated sessions

and others introduced topics in which they had a particular interest.

Once we had a list of areas of interest the Training and Support Team began to develop materials for the sessions. It was clear that people wanted an interactive workshop rather than one which involved a lot of papers. It was also important the papers which were given were practical and grounded rather than theoretical. We tried to provide written materials for each session so that people attending the sessions could take something away with them to use in their future work. And we also tried to provide opportunities in the workshop for networking between projects and for people attending it to find out more about the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Stronger Families Learning Exchange.

Interactive workshops are hard work. Concurrent sessions were organised and ways of registering peoples' choices were designed. Not only were we concerned with content, we were also concerned with how people might go about learning in each of the sessions.

As true action researchers we also built in ways for people to give us feedback as the workshop developed. Scrapbooks, feedback trees, a workshop news-sheet and photographs were all used as means of providing reflection and feedback.

### Acting and observing

By 1 April 2003 the workshop was ready to run. The day before saw endless journeys between the Institute and the workshop venue – the Hotel Y, a few city blocks away. Car loads of resources and equipment were

discussions as needed and hosted keynote speakers. We also found time to meet with people outside of workshop hours. Some participants will remember a long and very active night where *Richard Munt* showed them the joys of music and the Melbourne night scene. Everyone who had been out on that excursion, including Richard, looked a little pale the next morning. For some people it was their first visit to Melbourne and the joys of the Queen Victoria Market and shopping were fitted in around the workshop.

Among the highlights of the workshop were: the talk given by *Tim Costello* at the dinner; the newspaper on which people wrote their ideas, reflections and concerns; opportunities for projects to talk with each other, with the team and with FaCS

everything up. Endless rolls of butchers' paper filled with ideas, the wall newspaper, the map and other resources were jammed into boxes and then gradually written up to be used – in this Bulletin and in other ways.

### Reflection

Following the workshop, the team collected questionnaires and analysed them for feedback and to assist us in planning future events. We also brainstormed as a group our ideas and thoughts about the workshop. In particular, we focused on two questions: What have we done well? What could we have done better? An evaluation report of the workshop was developed (a summary is provided in this Bulletin), and we began to think about the next cycle of planning.

The Stronger Families Fund National Workshop was a great beginning. It brought people together, offered opportunities to learn more about action research and early intervention, and assisted projects to network together. However, as the projects have developed since the workshop, a second similar workshop did not seem the most appropriate way to meet better the needs of projects.

Instead, we decided to design some regional workshops that could explore particular themes and issues of concern to participants. We are now planning a series of workshops around Australia which will be short (one or two days), focused, and aimed at providing needed information and skills to particular projects and assisting them to contribute to the learnings which are beginning to emerge from Stronger Families Fund projects.

As with other aspects of the work of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange Training and Support Team, these workshops for the projects and for the Department of Family and Community Services will be developmental, using action research principles. We would welcome your ideas and help in planning the next cycle of workshops.

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transported, and other staff from the Institute helped to set up the rooms.

On the day we assembled early. A seven o'clock start meant frantic child care arrangements and a dash from home to the venue. People began arriving early. Everyone arrived safely. From Queensland to Tasmania and Western Australia to Victoria, they came by car and plane (although not by boat and train). They located their projects on the large map we had provided, began talking together and making choices for the day. In retrospect perhaps there were a few too many choices, but it did mean that people were not bored!

The workshop for us was both exciting and exhausting. We ran sessions, answered questions, set up displays, dealt with problems, organised extra

workers about their issues; excursions to places of interest around Melbourne; and keynote papers which provided new information and ideas. The workshop sessions were well attended and participation levels were high.

The team held a reflection session at the end of the first day and used participants' feedback to redesign some parts of the workshop. Throughout the workshop we continued to make changes and adaptations. There were problems, sometimes of space, sometimes with accommodation, and some sessions were better received than others. However, the feedback from participants was positive throughout the workshop.

At the end, as everyone left, the team began the daunting task of packing