

At the Stronger Families Fund National Workshop in April 2003, visiting UK researcher, *Dr Tess Ridge* spoke as part of a panel and ran a session on working with children. Some of her key points are outlined below.

Including children

Tess Ridge

The Stronger Families Fund projects are focused on working with families, but what do we mean by families? Do we mean parents and wider kin? Or do we mean parents, kin and children?

It is easy to concentrate on adults, carers and parents, and to overlook children. We can find ourselves talking to adults, while not seeing or engaging children. For example, we might be working with families and find that children are playing quietly in the background so we do not disturb them, or they might be “being a nuisance”, interrupting and demanding attention when we want to get on with important things, so we might distract them or remove them.

So what then is child-centred working? Sometimes I think we can be working in a way that focuses very intently on the child or children, and we can feel that, of course, our work is child focused. But this is not necessarily the same as *child-centred* working. To focus on the child is not necessarily to put the child at the centre. For example, in the United Kingdom children in the public care system attend their case reviews. They are present along with their parents or carers, their social workers, case workers and so on. This is a review process that is very much focused on the child and is intended to address the child’s best interests. But it is not child centred. When you engage with children you find that they find this whole procedure isolating, in some cases daunting, and in others humiliating. It is very rare for a child to think that the process was in any way intended to give children some rights and say in their lives.



We do not often hear from children. Adults are often presumed to speak for children so we hear from parents, carers, teachers, and so on. But children will have their own views, perspectives and issues that concern them, and they might well not be the same issues that adults would identify.

In child-centred practice and enquiry the intention is to try to keep the interests and wellbeing of children central to the process. To do this you have to engage with children and involve them wherever possible in the issues that concern them.

Why should we engage children wherever possible in our projects?

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Some work carried out with children aged five to six years in after school clubs illustrates this well. We wanted to know about how children felt about their after school clubs. Parents and carers had an important perspective to contribute, but children also had their own insights to give. They were unhappy about the

lighting; it was too gloomy in some clubs; some children got hungry and wished there was some food provided; some were tired and wished there was somewhere for them to have a quiet time, not just the structured activities. They were also concerned about the paint on the walls and their access to the garden, and so on. These were all valid and important insights affecting how those children experienced their care – insights which could have easily been overlooked by adults

who may have a different set of concerns.

When we start to think about children in this way we develop a broader understanding of the types of things that might affect children's lives and influence the type of childhood they are receiving. We may think straight away about family and extended kin, close social networks, neighbours, relatives and carers.

But children are also social beings in a community, they are also affected

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN

Tess Ridge

Where do children come in your project?

- Try to see where children come in your project and identify where you come in contact with children and why.
- How do children experience your presence in their lives, what do you contribute to them, what do they contribute to you?
- Explore ways and means through which you can incorporate them in a meaningful way and engage with their experiences.
- Be aware of things that are affecting children, don't confine this to their immediate environment.

Why engage with children wherever possible?

- Children are easily overlooked or obscured within the family and community setting.
- Adults often speak for children and the perspectives of children themselves are ignored or not sought.
- Children's views and perspectives may differ greatly from the views and perspectives of adults.
- Engaging with children can help to ensure that services are relevant to children's needs. Not just services for children but also services for families and parents.

- Insights from children can help practitioners and carers work more effectively.
- Involving children will also benefit children and help their self-esteem and confidence.

Where to start?

- Try to be child-centred rather than child focused
- Value children's opinions and perspectives
- Be aware that adults hold a position of power in all children's lives and children are used to doing what adults tell them to.
- Children can contribute in many different ways, different projects will have different priorities – but don't leave children out.
- Draw on methods which children are comfortable with. For example, smaller children might like to work together in groups. Older children might prefer to be in pairs or help and contribute on an individual level.
- Older children and siblings in families can also contribute meaningfully.
- Be prepared to try different things with children, some will work better than others. The important thing is to maintain your overall commitment to including them.



by things outside of the family and home environment. Their quality of care, how they experience their crèche or nursery, their spatial environment, school and teachers, friendships and social relationships. There are also wider issues, such as children’s space, how the local environment affects children, their opportunities for play and social interaction, the impact of traffic on their lives, the quality of the streets and housing for children, shops and transport. On all these (and other) issues, children will have a contribution to make.

What are the advantages in engaging with children?

Engaging with children means that your project will be more holistic, as families mean children as well as parents. Insights gained from children can help adults work more effectively; their insights can also help to ensure that services that are provided are relevant to children’s needs.

Engaging with children is also valuable for children themselves. Research on participation work with children has shown that children learn to express their own needs, and they learn to consider the needs of others. They may develop skills of cooperation, negotiation and problem solving. When children are involved, and their ideas and capabilities are respected, they will grow in confidence and self-esteem.

Within the process of engaging with children, children and parents may

work together and this can strengthen relationships and foster greater understanding and respect.

Ways to involve children

Each project will be different, but there are some general points to consider.

Child-centred working means being aware of children at all times. Think about how your involvement with their families may affect them and be open to engaging with children, listening to them and realising the potential for them to participate and contribute to your work. In some cases we might be working with very young children who may not be able to contribute in any clear way, but we still need to be aware of them. We may be concentrating on very young children and their parents and fail to see the older siblings – brothers and sisters who are also in the family, and who may have a lot to contribute.

Children can be involved and participate in many different ways. You can engage with them individually, or in small groups. You can talk with them, and they can participate in discussions, community meetings, or councils. You may be researchers, taking photographs of things that concern children, like the quality of their playgrounds, where they most like to go, what they like best or worst about somewhere or something. Children can make scrapbooks,

videos, work together in groups to make plays to design and perform, keep diaries, use disposable cameras, make drawings etc.

Maya Haviland, from the Stronger Families Learning Exchange team at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, has a good example of this from one of the Stronger Families Fund projects she works with.

Maya has been working with small children using disposable cameras. The children were able to take photographs of where they were in the same way as the adults did. What was interesting to see was how the children saw the space in a completely different way from adults. Their photographs were pitched at a different level. They also identified places and areas as important that were not considered by adults to be so. For instance, they identified one room as their favourite room to play in. Yet this was a rarely used area which the children were quite often told to keep out of. Having the photographs was also good for the children, they were able to talk about their spaces and they were able to experience adults listening and responding to them about what they think and see.

There are many different ways to involve children, and each project will have its own focus. But in each case it is worth having a strong commitment to engaging with children, by seeing and recognising that children have a perspective too.

I am often told that my work is about giving children a voice, but it is not giving children a voice that I think is important. They already have voices. What is important is giving children a hearing, *listening* to their voices and valuing their contributions.

Dr Tess Ridge, a lecturer and researcher in the Department of Social and Policy Sciences, at the University of Bath in the United Kingdom, was a visiting scholar at the Australian Institute of Family Studies for some months in 2003. Her specialist fields of study are childhood poverty and social exclusion, and child and family policy.

