

Centres collaborate on new visual resource

The Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle in New South Wales and St Luke's Innovative Resources from Bendigo have collaborated to produce a very visual resource titled *Our Scrapbook of Strengths*.

The Scrapbook is a visual resource comprising 42 "strengths cards" that are loose-leaf replicas of pages from a photo album or a scrapbook. The themes are colour-coded to make the resource easy to use. Each card contains full-colour illustrations grouped under a theme. For example, under the theme of "Communication" are the following "strengths statements": "We are honest with each other", "We listen to each other", "We stay in contact with each other", "We talk openly with each other", "We can laugh together".

The cards are designed as conversational tools for use by those wanting to explore relationships that exist within families, couples, groups, organisations or communities.

The ideas for this book were based on the findings of the 1999 qualitative "Australian Family Strengths Research project" funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services. The project's aims were to identify family strengths as perceived by 600 Australian families using theme and language analysis.

Seven strength themes emerged from this study: Communication, Togetherness, Sharing Activities, Affection,

Support, Acceptance, and Commitment. The authors added Resilience. These themes were subsequently used in the development of the themes used in *Our Scrapbook of Strengths*.

people of a highlight in the group's life. Then a few questions can be asked like "Can each of you tell me a story of the group at its best?" followed by "What was happening at the time? Why was



How can the Scrapbook be used?

Handy "tips" and "cautions" for using the Scrapbook are outlined in the introductory section, and the authors recommend use of the resource for a number of audiences and in variety of ways.

Building resilience. Their first suggestion for its use is to build resilience, and there are some suggested questions for resilience-building exercises.

Strengths-based storytelling. Inviting participants of a group or family to tell their story of strength and success can be empowering. Scanning the cards and choosing one can remind

the event or situation so successful? What strengths were evident?"

Working on family of origin. Counselors or others who work with children might choose to use this resource to discuss issues about their family of origin and use the cards to express their thoughts or feelings.

Working with couples. The authors suggest this tool can be used for relationship and pre-marital education particularly because of "its ability to highlight similarities and differences in partners' experiences of family", in a non-threatening way, putting the experiences in the contexts of strengths

THE FAMILY ACTION CENTRE "is a multi-disciplinary centre with the vision of a truly civil society and a belief that family wellbeing is a cornerstone of healthy communities". The Centre develops and implements programs to assist families and communities; distributes information through training, consultation, conferences and publication; advocates for family wellbeing and stronger communities; and conducts family and community research.

ST LUKE'S ANGLICARE is well known for its "strengths-based philosophy", which was developed in the late 1980s. At that time working with this philosophy was seen as a radical model for delivering family services but this approach has fast gathered momentum in welfare organisations. St. Luke's Innovative Resources publishes "conversational prompts" which show people the importance of strengths, values, relationships, and methods of learning and growing. Life-changing experiences prompted by art or symbols can be identified with this kind of resource. Peoples' strengths are also the best resource to draw upon in overcoming problems.

rather than deficits, and using the cards to explore conflict resolution.

Working with blended and step families. The resource may be used in helping members of families that have come together to identify and compare the differences and similarities of the strengths from their respective families as a way of “building acceptance, a sense of belonging and renegotiating rules in the new family constellation”.

Pictures of the future. The resource can be used as a solution-focused approach to family work, group work, community

is likely to appeal to a wide range of people. It has a strengths-based focus on relationships rather than focusing on the negatives. It has the potential to raise children’s awareness of the positive elements of belonging to a family and is potentially empowering.

The resource would be excellent for people who respond well to visual aids – particularly children, and for people who find it difficult to express thoughts through words. It could be useful for helping children put together a scrapbook of their own experiences of family.

cards would depend on the clients, their current state of mind, and the present circumstances of their life.

Workers may wish to exercise caution in use of this tool with children who have had negative experiences of family or who have experience of family violence, as the positive images of family may not be well received. In these circumstances it may be harmful to show children some of these cards unless the worker is highly skilled and can deal with the strong emotions that these cards have the potential to evoke.



building or organisational planning, suggesting a preferred vision of the future rather than an analysis of current problems. These conversational prompts then, can provide participants with a vision of what relationships might look like in the future.

Other uses. The authors also outline how the Scrapbook would be a useful resource for family workers, for caregiver assessments, and for teachers and school workers.

Advantages

This attractively presented resource has a number of positive features. It is practical and hands-on and provides a useful tool – or, as the authors state, “a conversation prompt to assist in identifying, mobilising and celebrating strengths in relationships”. It is flexible and versatile and gives workers with creative abilities scope to work with families, couples, organisations, or communities on their relationships. The resource makes a good attempt to represent diversity in all its forms and

Limitations

The authors point out that they have deliberately not used the word “family” in this resource. Yet most of the pictures appear to be about relationships between family members. The Scrapbook tries hard to cater to a range of audiences but appears to have more relevance for work with young children or with adults working on parent–child relationships. It may have less appeal to teenagers, or to adults working on organisational relationships.

Although it does contain pictures of Indigenous people, most of the cards would have limited cultural relevance in working with an Indigenous population. Thus use of this resource may be meaningful for some but not for others. The authors rightly point out that such a tool is not “guaranteed to work in all situations and the use of any tool may have unintended consequences” and that “no single metaphor exists for everyone”. The use of these

Conclusion

Overall, this is a well-presented and hands-on resource, with the potential to be used by skilled workers to assist some families, couples or children to identify and build upon the strengths that exist within their relationships. Creativity, versatility and sensitivity in the application of the Scrapbook by skilled facilitators will be the key to its successful use.

Our Scrapbook of Strengths is available for sale from Metaphors Bookshop and Innovative Resources, 137 McCrae Street, Bendigo, Victoria. Phone: 03 5442 0500. Email: stlukeir@stlukes.org.au. It is also available in the Stronger Families Learning Exchange collection and may be borrowed from the Australian Institute of Family Studies library, via the interlibrary loan system.

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