

A “natural” affiliation in *community development*

Members of the Illawarra Community Development Project team outline what constitutes a successful working partnership.

The Illawarra Community Development Project is a collaborative community development project between Albion Park Neighbourhood Association, Barnardos Australia South Coast, and Shellharbour City Council, all located in the Illawarra area of New South Wales, located two hours south of Sydney. The project provides three projects across three different areas – two low-density public housing estates (Albion Park), a single high-density public housing estate (Barnados), and a newly developed private housing estate (Shellharbour).

The focus of the Illawarra project is on children and families within the differing housing estates and within the context of their whole community. The partnership has focused on the researching of child and family community development models and has been conducted over the past two years.

The aim of the research is to develop:

- best practice guidelines in child and family community development;
- models of community development which can be used in differing housing areas across factors of housing density, socio-economic status, community connectedness, private and public housing, cluster housing versus urban sprawl, new and established communities, and within differing organisational arrangements;
- core community development strategies used despite community differences;
- specialised community development strategies used to cater to differing indicators in the community;

- data on the effect of differing organisational structures on the practice of child and family community development;
- differing practice modes used to cater to the communities; and
- data on the common issues of children and their families across differing housing types, communities and socio economic status of communities.

The research has been conducted collaboratively between the three agencies using focus groups, statistical data collection on community development, and documentation of programs. The project commenced with focus groups held monthly to document the practice across the three projects. The outcomes of these focus groups were then fed into the monthly research group meetings. These data were supplemented with statistical data on the types of community development undertaken, and with planning documents on groups and projects being undertaken.

This resulted in the development of a draft model of child and family community development within the first 12 months of the project (see SFLEX website for conference papers on the model). Subsequently, practice has been documented and the work and model evolved through quarterly research group meetings.

Critical to the research was the fact that each project developed autonomously according to the local needs of their community. Albion Park worked with two low density public housing estates in a suburb undergoing rapid private housing

development in a semi urban / old rural environment. This suburb has poor human services and public transport, and a lack of tolerance of public housing estates. Barnardos worked with a well established high density housing estate with key features of high crime and violence issues, a poor history of stable human services being provided on the estate and major safety concerns for residents. Shellharbour City Council worked with the Flinders estate, a newly developed private housing estate with an influx of families from outside of the Illawarra and only a fledgling sense of community connectedness.

The projects were managed by three differing organisations. Albion Park is a community managed neighbourhood association with one worker prior to this project. Barnardos South Coast is part of a boutique charitable child welfare agency, Barnardos Australia, with an established South Coast Children’s Family Centre providing integrated child welfare services. Shellharbour City Council is a local government bureaucracy providing community services within its local government area as a component of the larger local council services and functions. Managers from each of these agencies, as well as the community development workers, have formed the research group from the commencement of the Illawarra project.

What has made the collaboration work?

The project presented a workshop on collaboration at the first Stronger Families Workshop in Melbourne in



ELLEN FISH provides an overview of the way the Stronger Families Fund projects have been progressing

This article discusses the progress of Stronger Families Fund projects as expressed through their regular reporting in the Stronger Families Learning Exchange Bulletins. The information presented here is drawn from Bulletins 1, 2, 3, and this edition – Bulletin No. 5.

The projects answered four rounds of questions as they progressed from their early days until now (see accompanying box on page 23 for the complete list of questions). In the first round of questions, projects gave their own interpretation of their aims. The second round of questions produced a further update on the projects' development as well as how their community had responded to them. Action research incorporated into the work of their project was the core issue of a third round of questions. The fourth round of questions explored projects' perceived changes to their community and sustainability.

The majority of the 50 current Stronger Families Fund projects have answered at least one round of questions. Many of the projects are still new (a year or less old), and have completed only the first round of questions. Some projects have not responded at all to these questions. There is more variety in the themes below than is possible to consider in this short overview.

However, several common themes clearly emerged from projects' responses. The focus here is on responses from two key questions from each round. By examining these themes, and also by looking at what projects have been doing over time, it is possible to follow the projects' journeys.

Introductory reports

In the first round of questions projects considered their aims and how they were achieving these. Broadly categorised, these aims are:

- building upon and improving parenting skills;
- improvement of health and nutrition for children and families;

2003. It posed that collaborations and partnerships between agencies fall into three general groupings which are outlined in the model developed by Vivienne Cunningham-Smith. (See following section).

"Natural" affiliations

"Natural" affiliations occur where organisations or agencies have similar or the same core business and practice base, a history of successful multidisciplinary practice or service networking leading to established practices and cultures of interagency work, and compatible client bases leading to common understandings of client / community need.

These partnerships or collaborations don't cause a great deal of pain to those involved and appear to be "natural" collaborations because the work of the agencies fits together smoothly.

"Middle of the road" collaborations

"Middle of the road" collaborations occur where organisations don't have compatible core business, practice base, perceptions of the target groups, histories of service networking, and their experiences are different with multidisciplinary practice. However, they do have some of these things in common which provides the platform for successful collaboration – for example, their commitment to and understanding of the target group.

These collaborations experience highs and lows, and they don't always feel painless for the partners. It is to be expected that where these collaborations exist there is a need for constant communication and reworking of the partnership and collaborative frameworks for which goodwill and commitment on the part of workers and managers is the critical factor.

Such collaborations work with a little more forethought and effort spent on the partnership because it seems we don't have the largesse of naturally fitting together like a glove and a hand.

"Dastardly feeling" collaborations

"Dastardly feeling" collaborations occur where organisations have vastly different practice bases, core business,

perceptions of their target groups and experience in multidisciplinary work. These collaborations feel like you are pulling teeth!! Nothing goes right, there is awful conflict on both sides, everyone is drained.

These collaborations take a lot of forward planning to be successful – planning similar to that of Richard Catalano's (2003) "Getting Started Stage" in his Communities That Care model. This stage tells us that partners need to get around the table and nut out their views on: their readiness to partner with each other at all levels, not just management; who and what the target group or community is, and to reach a common understanding; what the different practice bases and philosophies of the agencies are, and what will lead to conflict and what is compatible; and what the agencies' experiences and practices on service collaboration are, and what practice and policy frameworks need to be developed.

In other words, these collaborations need a lot of preparation time otherwise they will fail in a blaze of glory and leave you feeling terrible.

Illawarra affiliation

So what has the Illawarra Community Development Project been? Of course – a natural affiliation! And that has made it so much easier to get on with the work and develop a model of child and family community development work that hopefully can be used throughout Australia to guide future practice.

Reference

Catalano, Richard F. (2003), "Using prevention science to guide positive youth development in communities: Communities that care", Paper presented to *Beyond the Rhetoric in Early Intervention Conference*, Adelaide.

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