

# Sharing the Learnings

Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services Newsletter

Strengths Based Practice for Children's Services in South Eastern Sydney



Lady Gowrie Child Centre



Families NSW



Issue 3 August 2007

## Welcome to Issue 3 of 'Sharing the Learnings'

Over the past three months the project has started to look at the role children's services play in supporting families. Participants in the intensive professional development component of the project have taken part in training around family centred practice and we have begun to look at how we incorporate this into day-to-day practice. We have also reflected on ways we are already partnering with families – some of the creative things services are doing will be showcased in this issue.

### Your feedback

Our recent seminars on working with families to build strengths were well attended. We received some great feedback about the relevance of family centred practice to early childhood services and the importance of engaging with families to support them in their vital role of parenting. This highlighted the need for further hands-on practice sessions to give participants the opportunity to explore how to put the approach into practice. We have taken the feedback on board and will investigate how we can best meet this need.

### Your feedback is important to us!

Let us know what you've found useful, and not so useful, about this newsletter and what you'd like to see more of.

### Share your learnings with us

If you want to share any learnings, such as books or resources you've discovered, we would love to hear from you. Contact Karen Andrews so we can include your ideas.

### In this issue

This issue shares the learnings from the second of the training sessions held in May 2007 and includes:

- An introduction to **family centred practice**
- Some ideas about **applying the approach in day-to-day practice**, including some practical tools.
- A look at our **work with families** and ways of **developing partnerships and sharing decision-making**
- A showcase of the **ways services are already partnering with families**.

### In this issue

**Introduction to Family Centred Practice – What is it and how can we apply it in day-to-day practice?**

**Reflecting on our work with families – developing partnerships and sharing decision-making**

**Showcase: Ways we are already partnering with families**

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The 'Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services' project is a Families NSW initiative in the South East Sydney Region. The Benevolent Society, in partnership with Lady Gowrie Child Centre, Sydney is working collaboratively on this project to support children's services to incorporate a strengths based family centred approach into their day-to-day work.

# Introduction to family centred practice in early childhood services



## Family centred practice training

In May we delivered three half-day training sessions across South East Sydney for children's services staff participating in the intensive professional development component of the project. Greg Antcliff, Senior Manager Early Childhood Services at The Benevolent Society, led the groups through the session. Sessions included an introduction to family centred practice, and an overview of the current social climate (life in the modern world) and how it impacts on families' parenting role. The training acknowledged the changing role of early childhood services – how we are increasingly becoming a hub and a point of connection to the community – and looked at how children's services are already responding to this change. Our role has broadened from focusing on the child to supporting families and seeing children in the context of their family and community.

## Family centred practice – what is it?

Family centred practice is whole-family involvement where a family's sense of competence is nurtured. It places families at the centre in decisions and actions involving children, parent and family priorities and preferences (Dunst, 2000).

The family centred approach begins with the child's and family's strengths, needs and hopes, and results in services which respond to the needs of the whole family. The role of the service provider is to support, encourage, and enhance the competence and confidence of parents in their role as caregivers (Viscardis, 1998).

Principles and practices we need to apply when working from a family centred perspective include:

- Focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses
- Building authentic relationships with children and families
- Facilitating children's services to link families to their communities
- Respecting children's and families' rights to self-determination
- A belief that change is inevitable
- A belief that all people and all communities have resources
- Commitment to cultural competence
- Embrace empowerment as a process and a goal (Larsen, 2000, pp 70-75 )

A family centred approach informs the way we view, describe, understand and work with children and their families. The approach means not focusing on what is 'wrong' with the child or family, but seeing that children and their families have strengths and resources to help them work through any issues. It also means we don't view the child or the family as failures, because we can see that the issues they are facing can often be explained by life circumstances and the modern world we live in (Larsen, 2000). It means that when we are working with families we place the child in the context of the family and the family in the context of the community.

Often when we work with families they are lacking in confidence about their parenting role. There's so much information available about how a child should be parented, it can be confusing for parents. We need to reassure families that there's no one 'right' way to raise children and appreciate that families are doing the best they can. Where there are concerns about the safety, welfare or well being of a child, we need to respond appropriately and non-judgmentally while ensuring their safety takes precedence. We need to build parents' confidence, so they can respond to their children's cues and feel that they are doing a good job.

Some of the **qualities** of staff engaging in family centred practice include:

- Professional expertise
- Respect
- Genuineness
- Empathy
- Humility
- Quiet enthusiasm
- Personal integrity

Some of the **communication skills** of staff engaging in family centred practice include:

- Concentration/active listening
- Prompting and exploration
- Empathic responding
- Summarising
- Enabling change
- Negotiating
- Problem solving

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## Applying the approach in day-to-day practice

When applying the approach in our day-to-day work there are a number of practical tools we can use to support this, including:

### Practical tools – engaging families

It is our job to engage families. It isn't their role to initiate this engagement. Families engage, and stay engaged, when they feel heard. We need to ask lots of questions about what has and hasn't worked for the family in the care of their child. This gives us the means to individualise our responses to the specific needs/wishes of the family.

The training highlighted the impact we can have on families. Even the simplest of things can change the way a family feels about a service or their child. One example of this is the way children and parents are greeted when they arrive. The individual greeting of children and their parents/carers can set the tone for the rest of the day. It is an opportunity to invite the child to enter the space and learn, and sends a clear message to parents that their child is welcomed in the space. This can often mean families leave their child feeling confident that he or she is cared for and respected.

To engage families some of the things we can do are:

- Provide an immediate response so families feel heard and respected.
- Start with the basics – small successes. Look for early problems and easy solutions first. Show families that together you can make things happen.
- Listen, listen, listen! We need to ask lots of questions about what has and has not worked for this specific family in the care of their child so our response can be individualised.
- Be supportive, not punitive.

### Practical tools – questioning techniques

Different questions can give us different information about what is happening for families. The kinds of questions we use can also support families in recognising their own strengths and developing their own solutions. Some of the different questioning techniques identified in the training included:

**Exception questions** – we can use these when a family feels the issue/problem is always there. Examples include:

- You said earlier that it's not always like this. Can you tell me more about the other times?
- What's different the times when you think you have handled the situation well?
- I know you feel like you aren't sure how to react when your child behaves this way. Tell me about the times you have been successful, even just a bit!

**Expanding the picture with families** – we can use these when a family is not giving us much information about the issue/problem. Examples include:

- **How** did you do that?
- **What** did you do that was different?
- **How** did that make a difference?
- **How** do you think that was different for your child?

**Coping questions** – we can use these questions when the family feels consumed by the issue/problem. Examples include:

- Given how stressful things are for you, how are you coping?
- How come things aren't worse, given all the things you are going through?



# strengths

- I'm sure there are days you just feel like walking away from it all. What stops you?
- You've said that dealing with three kids under 5 is a handful. I'm sure they keep you running the whole time. How do you keep going day after day?
- If your children could tell me, what would they say you are doing that helps them feel even just a little bit better about things?

**Future focus questions** – we can use these questions when the family is bogged down by the issue/problem and is finding it difficult to move forward. Examples include:

- What is the first thing you would notice that would tell you that things were different?
- What else would you notice?
- First thing, when you get out of bed, how would you know that something different has happened?
- Okay, you'd feel better. When you feel better, what will you be doing?
- What will your partner see that will show that you're feeling better?

**Scaling questions** – we can use these questions to clarify how the family is feeling about the issue/problem and how they can begin to work with the issue/problem. Examples include:

- On a scale from zero to ten, where zero means 'I feel completely unsafe' and ten is 'everything is okay', where are you now? What would have to happen for you to move up one step on that scale?
- On a scale of zero to ten where zero is 'I'm not coping at all' and ten is 'I feel confident and can manage the things I need to', where are you now? What keeps you that high on the scale? What would it take to move up one step on the scale?

Many services are already working from a family centred perspective and are applying the principles and practices in their work. The training reinforced the importance of valuing what services are already doing to form partnerships with families. Participants were encouraged to refocus on those strategies and to build on them, to make sure all families are engaged. The training reinforced that this should be the focus of our everyday practice, rather than being seen as just another 'burden' to be added on to the daily workload.

Early childhood research strongly indicates that engaging with families, supporting families in parenting their children, developing positive relationships with families, bridging the gap between the home and centre learning environments, connecting families to informal supports and connecting families to the service network, benefits children in their developmental and learning trajectories.

## References/ resources

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# Reflecting on our work with families

Early childhood professionals have a role to play in supporting families with young children. The early childhood service is often the first point of contact for families and a service they interact with on a long-term basis. This means early childhood professionals often play a supportive role in resources and referrals for families based on their strengths in raising their child. This affects how families build trusting relationships with the staff in the service.

## Building family centred practice

Building relationships with families takes time, patience and acceptance of what each brings to parenting. Families have their own practices, beliefs and life experiences, just as early childhood staff do. Everyone sees the world through their own eyes, so we often make judgments about the different ways parents do things. We need to remember that a family's knowledge is different from that of early childhood professionals. Families use personal knowledge, whereas early childhood professionals' knowledge is based on theoretical understandings. Neither party is right or wrong – we are just different. To begin to develop meaningful partnerships with families means letting families know that there is no one 'right' way to parent.

## What's best for children?

Research tells us that families want the best for their child and that there are many approaches to raising children. Families have known their child longer than we have, and they have an intimate knowledge of the child's strengths, interests and needs. Family centred practice means we empower families in their role as parents and work collaboratively with families in the care of their child/ren by offering choices and sharing decision-making. When we focus on families' strengths, listen to them and respond to their needs, families are more likely to feel heard. When this happens, they are more likely to feel they have some power, choice and control in a situation. This in itself leads to a more cooperative partnership that is respectful of the different strengths families and professionals bring to the care of children.

## How can we share decision-making?

As early childhood professionals we often have control over making decisions. These can include such things as:

- Documentation of children's profiles: the observations we write about the child, whether families have access to them, the progress report given to families (often one way communication from staff to family).
- Family involvement: this could include being a part of the accreditation process committee, parent committee where we set the agenda, reading a book to the children, providing us with key words in their home language, or asking families to put sunscreen on their child at the start of the day.
- Sharing of information: how we communicate with families, e.g. casual talk, formal meetings or written information.
- Asking families to share their knowledge/experiences about childrearing practices as well as information that is relevant to their child's life. Is this information sharing reciprocated? What are the staff member's values/beliefs? What are the values of the service?

The types of decisions we make and the control we have sends messages to our families. Think about the structures and routines in place at your service (and who controls them) and reflect from a family's perspective on the following:

## Reflecting on what we believe about family

Close your eyes, and come up with a picture of 'family'. Take a few minutes to create your picture as fully as you can. Open your eyes. How does your picture of 'family' compare with the family you grew up in? How does it compare with the family you are in now? Was your picture of family a single type of family or a broader definition? Does your definition of family need any work so it can include all the different kinds of families you know? Write down your thoughts and share them with your colleagues.

Keyser, J. (2006). *From parents to partners: Building a family centred early childhood program*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.



# reflecting



1. Do families feel they can speak to the staff about milestone celebrations and/or issues about their child?
2. Do families worry that they are being judged by staff about how they parent their child?
3. Do families feel the focus in communication is about the strengths of the children not their weaknesses?
4. Do staff feel the focus in communication is about the strengths of the children not their weaknesses?
5. Do families feel comfortable in offering suggestions regarding the routine/program for their child?
6. Do families feel comfortable about contributing to the documentation relating to their child (strengths, celebrations, interests or needs)?
7. Do staff feel empowered to talk to families about the theoretical perspectives of their documentation.

For relationships to exist on a more equal basis we may need to change the way that we, as early childhood professionals, relate to families. We need to value the comments and responses families give us. This may require different 'doors' being opened and our acknowledgment that both early childhood professionals and families have particular expertise in relation to children. This may mean letting go of some of our power, which may make us feel vulnerable and not in control.

Some strategies in embracing family centred practice may include:

- Acknowledging that families have personal information about their child while we carry early childhood knowledge.
- Letting families explain to staff what they would like for their child and negotiating with them about these ideas.
- Acknowledging that families are diverse.
- Asking families during orientation or further in the year what ways of communicating with staff they prefer, i.e. informal communication, formal meetings, or written information in notebooks.
- Providing space where families can access and view their child's profile without having to ask staff.
- Recognising that communication pathways can take many forms, for example, face to face discussion, reading journals, written programs, emails, online newsletters or photos and comments that capture children's learning and development.
- Acknowledging that families may need flexible times to meet with the director or other team members.
- Encouraging families to stay as long as they want in the service rather than mandating particular times.
- Providing staff profiles that document some of their background (eg. cultural background).
- Accepting that families may not want to share information.

Just as the relationships that we develop with children are important, so too are the relationships between important adults in a child's life. These relationships support children's sense of safety and wellbeing and help children learn how to communicate, express caring, solve problems and work together. By developing partnerships with families that are mutually respectful and cooperative and where decision making is shared we are not only supporting families but also providing children with an opportunity to develop positive relationship skills (Keyser, J).

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# Showcase – Ways to partner with families

Throughout the training and the seminars, services were asked what they are already doing to partner with families. Some of the things identified were:

- Informal get-togethers between families and staff such as morning teas, celebrations, barbeques etc. (this provided opportunities for families to link with other families for support)
- Formal meetings, parent/teacher nights, portfolio sharing evenings
- Two way information sharing between parents/carers and staff at pick up and drop off, via telephone calls and by using communication sheets
- Written communication including newsletters, portfolios, photos, communication books, email
- Home visits prior to children commencing
- Orientation/induction procedures that involve families, including parents' goals and hopes for their child/ren
- Becoming familiar with families' parenting practices (eg. asking parents about the ways they comfort their child)
- Welcoming and greeting children and families by name
- Providing regular opportunities for families to reflect on the program (eg. parent committees, surveys)
- Having name tags for staff so they are identifiable
- Including fathers by holding family barbeques, fathers' nights and inviting fathers to be involved in maintenance tasks. This helps to establish the relationship between fathers and the service
- Creating opportunities for families to connect with each other(eg. groups where parents share parenting tips)
- Provide meeting space for families and other professionals.



## Reflection exercises you or your team may like to try:

### Parent Expertise:

What do families know about their children?

How much information do your families share with you?

### Compare with:

### Early Childhood Expertise:

What kind of knowledge and information do you have about children?

Think about your training – What have you learned?

(See Keyser, J.)

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