

Sharing the Learnings

Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services Newsletter

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



Issue 1 March 2007

Welcome to the first issue of our newsletter!

'Sharing the Learnings' is a newsletter full of reflections and learnings gained in the Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services project. It is a resource both for people who are participating in the project and those who are not so directly involved.

Children's services play an important role in the lives of children and families in the community and are often the first place families turn to for assistance. This often increases the demands on the staff in services.

Strengths based practice is a way of working with colleagues, children and families that can build skills in this area. It encourages us to:

- Focus on what we – and others – can do rather than what we can't do
- In working with children, to have them and their families as our focus
- Reflect on our work and our personal strengths, and think about them in particular ways that help us to develop and grow

There is more information about strengths based practice on page two

The Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services Project particularly aims to support children's services to build on their strengths by developing a common understanding of the strengths based family centred approach and develop practical tools that will assist staff in services in their work with children and families. The project will also support growth in the working relationships between children's services and other health, welfare and specialist agencies in the South East Sydney Region.

The project has been operating since August 2006. It has delivered training and established 'reflective learning circles'. During the course of the project there will be more training opportunities and the reflective learning circles will continue through till December 2007.

If you want to know more about strengths based practice or whats happening in the project contact the project coordinator

In this issue

This issue shares the learnings from the first of the training sessions held in November & December 2006. It includes

- an outline of the principles of **the strengths approach**
- some ideas about **applying the approach in day-to-day practice**, including some practical strategies and tools
- a look at **reflective practice** and some **tips for becoming reflective practitioners**
- a showcase of **Strengths Based Tools in Action** (the outcome of a partnership with another Families First initiative, the Professional Development Project, to bring Russell Deal, the Director of St Luke's Innovative Resources to Sydney for this training) with a close-up on **using the 'Bears Cards'**

In this issue

Introduction to the Strengths Approach – What it is and how we can apply it in day-to-day practice.

Reflecting on our practice – Tips for becoming reflective practitioners.

Strengths Based Tools in Action – Using the 'Bears Cards'

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The 'Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services' project is a Families First funded 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 the Strengths Approach: Key messages from our first training session

The strengths approach resonates with many fundamental early childhood beliefs:

- Respecting people's rights and uniqueness
- Empowering people
- Recognising strengths and building on them
- Opportunity for mutual learning
- People are experts in their own lives
- The issue is the problem not the person.

The strengths approach invites us to notice:

- What is working
- The strengths and resources we have and the strengths and resources of others
- The power of every word we use



The November training delivered three half-day sessions across South East Sydney for those children's services staff participating in the intensive professional development component of the project. The staff came from a broad range of service types including long day care (community based and private); occasional care; preschool and family day care.

Participants gave positive feedback about the session and reported the relevance to their work. Those services participating in the project will meet on a regular basis to reflect on training that has taken place and how they are implementing this into their day-to-day practice. Watch this space for further learnings.

Anne Heath, an experienced practitioner in strengths based work led the groups through the session which included an introduction to the strengths approach, as well as a brief historical overview of its origins in social welfare.

The Strengths Approach – what is it?

It is an approach to working with children and families, not a prescriptive set of rules or techniques or a model of service delivery. Key foundations of the Strengths Approach are that:

1. It focuses on the strengths and resources that people have to put toward their problems.
2. The values and beliefs of workers (staff) are the most important resource in using the approach.

Applying the approach in day-to-day practice

Beginning strategies – Participants were asked to identify a strength, from a set of strengths cards, that they had brought with them to the training session. This created a positive start to the training and demonstrated the value of recognising our strengths when working with staff teams. For example, one participant identified 'adaptable' as her strength. She saw that she used this skill when working with children and families and also that it was her adaptability that allowed her to rearrange her normal daily routine so she could participate in the training session.

Participants also had the opportunity to examine the fundamentals of the Strengths Approach and how these fit with their own services philosophies, keeping in mind the families, children and staff they work with. This provided another good example of how the approach could be used in services and highlighted the compatibility of this approach in children's services.

Practical Tools – using questions, language and columns

Questions – In the training we learnt about the different types of questions and the different ways we can use them. Questions can help us to:

- Identify a problem or an issue
- Set achievable goals
- Have a starting point for change
- Notice what is already working well
- Identify strengths and exceptions
- Measure progress and
- Allow for the introduction of metaphors.

We focussed on scaling questions, which help to give a starting point when working on an issue, as well as aiding the measurement of success. As an example, participants identified an issue and also placed the issue on a scale of 1–10 with regard to its impact on them, with 1 being the lowest, the worst that things could be and 10 being the highest, the best that things could be.

strengths

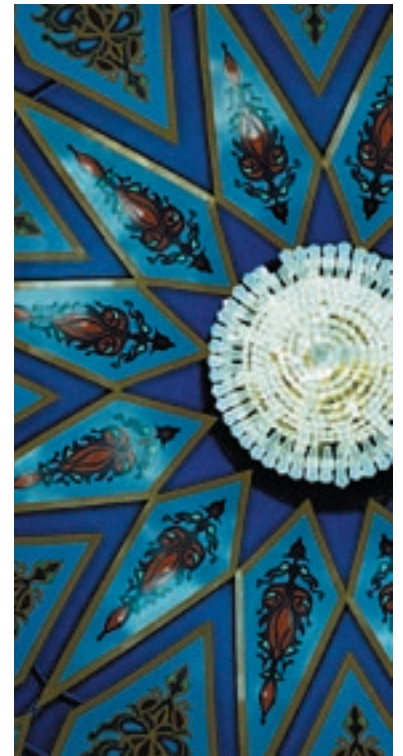
Everyone was asked to consider ‘what kept them that high on the scale’ (and therefore what was already working well) regardless of where on the scale they put themselves, and what would move them up one more point (this identifies ideas or strategies to improve the situation). This helps to identify strengths within a particular situation and to plan ahead. You can then think about what it would take to move up the scale 1 point. What strengths and resources would you need to draw on? What would you need from others to do this?

Other types of questions include:

1. Questions to help us see things differently for example “What is working?” rather than “What is the problem?”
2. Questions that help us maintain a focus on what is working such as When are things better? How are you doing that ?
3. Questions that keep us future focussed and developing a picture of success could be, How do you want things to be ? What will be the first sign that things are getting better ?

Language – Listening to the language of the people you are working with and adopting this in your conversations with them is a successful strategy for breaking down the power in relationships. It’s important never to underestimate the importance of language and to consider the implications of every word that you use.

Columns – The training also introduced participants to the ‘column approach’. This strategy is useful in breaking down an issue, identifying goals and the strengths and resources needed to achieve these goals and then developing an action plan. Below is a guide to using the column approach.



The issue	Picture of the future	Your strengths and resources	External strengths and resources	First steps
Spend some time clarifying what the issue is.	If the issue were resolved what would be happening. Ask yourself the miracle question (See below)	Spend time identifying the strengths and resources you have to put towards the picture of the future.	What strengths and resources do you need from others	Identify the first steps to take towards the picture of the future. This becomes the action plan.

(adapted from St Lukes Service Folders)

Strengths and resources could include knowledge, time, skills, experience or commitment.

The Miracle Question – When a problem weighs us down, it can often seem too hard to get a picture of what it will be like when that issue has gone. To step out of the ‘now’ (the problem/issue) and look at the future (the new behaviour) we sometimes need a prompt. The Miracle Question provides an opportunity to assume things will be different and gives us a different picture to aim for. When answering the Miracle Question it’s important to get a picture of yourself doing the new behaviour. Talk about what you will be doing, not what you won’t be doing.

The Question is “If I went to bed and a miracle happened overnight so that in the morning the problem that had been there had disappeared, what would be different? What would other people notice to be different?”

The new situation then becomes your goal or picture of the future (see table above).

This column approach can be used in various situations, including team planning, performance management with staff or planning with children and families. It’s important when using this approach to use language that matches the person you are working with.

Reflecting on our practice: Tips for becoming reflective practitioners

Reflective practice – what is it?

To be continuous learners we need to think about our work constantly, to understand and assess the impact of what we are doing and to identify ways we can improve. No matter what our experience level, there is always something new we can learn. A name for this is 'reflective practice', and we can all be 'reflective practitioners'!

Reflective practice is an active process of thinking about our experiences rather than just living them. This requires us to be curious about what we do and confident to explore what we learn and can learn. By being reflective practitioners we open ourselves up to possibilities for purposeful learning.

Self-awareness is central to the process of reflection and can be defined as:

"...the gradual and continual process of noticing and exploring aspects of the self, whether behavioural, psychological or physical with the intention of developing personal and interpersonal understanding.... To become more aware of and to have a deeper understanding of ourselves is to have a sharper and clearer picture of what is happening to others" (Burnard, 2002, pp 30–31).

When we engage in reflective practice we are taking the time to think about the issues that are impacting on us most. This involves describing what happened, thinking about the outcomes of the experience and planning what we want to do differently in the future.

When can we use reflective practice?

The answer is any time! We can reflect when there is a:

- Struggle – working out what is working and what could be going better.
- Dilemma – there is a clash between our values/beliefs and the approach being used.
- Positive experience – this could leave us excited about the experience and pondering what were the effective practices we used and what we could be doing more of?
- Uncertainty – unsure how to approach the situation so we reflect, implement and reach a new conclusion (this is often called a breakthrough).

How can we become reflective practitioners?

To implement reflective practice we need to clarify what we want to achieve or work on. The next step is to establish a routine, habit or structure to allow reflection to occur regularly. For instance every Friday afternoon during programming time 15 minutes could be allocated to record reflections in a journal. Or there maybe other opportunities in your work place to include reflective practice, for example at the beginning of the monthly staff meeting a group reflection is conducted in relation to one staff person's experience.

Reflective practice:

- Describing the experience.
- Reflecting on the experience (asking critical questions).
- Learning from the experience.
- Implementing new knowledge and/or gaining insight.
- Reflecting again.

Getting started

Try writing a story or dialogue about a recent incident that stood out for you (positive or negative) and address the two points below.

- Evaluate the issues – what is happening here – what is working, what could be going better?
- Learning insights – what might I try doing differently? What will I do more of? What have I learnt from this experience?



reflecting

Questions to ponder

- Individual level – What would it take for me to implement a regular reflection time into my day/ week/ month?
- Group/service level – What would it take to get my team to consider implementing reflective practice opportunities into team meetings?

Reflective practice can occur in two ways.

1. **At an individual level.** You write (not just think out aloud) about your experience in a reflective journal. Your story unpacks the experience, evaluates issues and identifies learning opportunities, this adds to the richness of the reflection. The reflective journal records your positive and negative experiences and documents why you do what you do and what you might do differently as a result of reflecting on your practice.
2. **At a group level.** One person recounts the experience, analyses and outlines their interpretation and then allows the group to make connections and ask critical questions. Collaborative discussion with professional colleagues helps you develop awareness of your own practices and values. From this group dialogue you can re-evaluate and identify learning opportunities of what you may modify/adapt.

What is in a reflective journal?

A reflective journal documents particular events or experiences which are:

- Surprising (positive or unusual) or
- Presenting you with a dilemma or worrying you (have you thinking about the issue in the middle of the night etc).

The structure of a reflective journal is up to the individual. Two examples of a structure are provided below as a guide:

Record of experience – includes:

- What I intended to do
- What actually happened
- What I am feeling about this?

Analyse the experience – includes:

- Why did the incident stand out?
- Did I approach the incident with any preconceived ideas or biases?
- Would the family/child/staff person see it from a different perspective?
- What knowledge, skills or attitudes have I learnt from this incident?
- Would I do things differently next time?
- Incidental entries – memos

From time to time...

- What has using this journal confirmed about what I already know and practice?
- What do I need to do to improve the quality of what I do?
- Are there other things I could be doing differently? How and why?
- Are there professional development activities I should be seeking?

The services participating in the 'Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services' project are using reflective journals to reflect on the following questions:

- What is going/working well?
- What am I contributing to things going/working well?
- What could be going better?
- On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 the lowest and 10 the highest) where would I rate the thing/things that could be going better?
- What is keeping me that high on the scale?
- What would it look like if it were going well? What would I notice about what I am doing? What would I notice about what others are doing?
- How am I going to get myself and my team there?
- What strengths, skills, and resources will I need to progress this?



Showcase: Strengths Based Tools in Action

On the 7th December about 60 early childhood practitioners from across the South East Sydney region attended the 'Strengths Based Tools in Action' Training. The training was made possible through the partnership of two Families First funded projects -the Professional Development Project and the Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services Project. The workshop was free to participants and each participant received a tool to take back to their services and use with children and families they are working with.

This interactive, hands-on workshop explored the possibilities of incorporating art and artefacts, colour, humour, rituals, poetry, simulations, music and creative writing into our practice. Russell Deal, Director of St Lukes Innovative Resources, led participants through various strengths based tools and their application for children's services professionals. One we liked is the 'Bears Cards'

Using the 'Bears Cards'

The 'Bears Cards' are colourful little cards with pictures of bears with an array of expressions. These magical cards are a great way for people of all ages to identify their feelings and start to develop a language around them. The use of bears cards is limited only by your imagination. Some ways they can be used are:

- In Team Meetings get staff to pick from the cards the one that best says to them how they are feeling at the start of the meeting. It is good to ask the person why they chose the card they did. This could then be repeated at the end of the meeting to make sure there is no unfinished business
- When conflict arises they can be used to help people express how they feel about a situation, they can also be used to increase empathy when someone is asked to identify a card/s showing what they think the other person might be feeling.
- The bears can help young children talk about difficult things in a fun way. By having the cards available to children to tell their story about a difficult time children are able to express the things that are important to them, the things that make the biggest impact on them. This gives us some critical insights into how we can best support that child. It also supports children's emotional health and well being by providing a positive experience of talking about their feelings and being heard.



The Bear Cards are published by Innovative Resources and reproduced here with permission (not shown full size).

For more information and to purchase Bear Cards visit www.innovativeresources.org

Useful Resources

For more information on **reflective practice** see:

<http://www.clt.uts.edu.au/Scholarship/Reflective.journal.htm>

http://web.apu.ac.uk/ndt/resources_events_reflectpractice010501_critincidanaly010501.html

For more information on the **Strengths Approach** see:

www.stlukes.org.au

www.innovativeresources.org

www.strengthscafe.com

www.brieftherapysydney.com.au

www.dulwichcentre.com.au

Share your Learnings with us!

If you want to share any learnings, resources, books or tools etc that you've discovered then contact Karen Andrews so we can include your learnings. Your feedback is important to us. Let us know what you have found useful, not useful about this newsletter, or what you want to see more of.

For more information visit www.bensoc.org.au