

Sharing the Learnings

Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services Newsletter

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



Issue 2 June 2007

Welcome to Issue 2 of 'Sharing the Learnings'

Over the past months, the project focus has been on how we can incorporate the strengths approach into our work and, in particular, with our teams. The learning circle discussions have included managing difficult staff, recruitment, resolving conflict in teams and ways to incorporate the strengths approach into day-to-day practice in a meaningful way. The articles in this issue reflect the recent learnings.

Upcoming Events

Working with families to build strengths – family centred practice in early childhood services

The Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services Project is pleased to present this interactive seminar for early childhood services. The seminar will provide participants with an opportunity to explore ways of engaging families in the early childhood setting and building thriving relationships with parents to support children's growth and development. Three sessions will be held in June:

- Sutherland District Trade Union Club, Gymea on 7 June from 9.30am–11.30am
- St George Leagues Club on 13 June from 2.00pm–4.00pm
- Waverley Library on 21 June from 2.30pm–4.30pm

Limited places are available for this free seminar. For bookings and further information contact Karen Andrews, Project Coordinator, Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services: t 9130 7336 or email karenan@bensoc.org.au

In this Issue

This issue shares learnings from the last few months and explores ways to build strengths in teams by developing a strengths based culture. We also take a look at developing a shared vision to create a team culture that supports staff in their day to day work to reflect on their practice. We discuss the importance of continuous learning and are reminded about what supports us as adult learners.

This issue's showcase looks at the use of appreciation journals to boost staff morale and highlight good practice in a way that motivates and values the work of early childhood professionals.

In this issue

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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.

Building Strengths in Teams – Creating a strengths based culture



Creating a strengths based culture

Our staff are our biggest asset and our most expensive resource. We all want to have staff who are performing at their best and are energetic, creative and innovative. Just as we need to create environments conducive to children's optimal growth and development, leaders in children's services have a responsibility to create environments that are conducive to staff growth. Staff job satisfaction is a good guide to how things are going in a team. When morale is low it indicates that it is time to do something different.

One way of investing in our staff is to develop a strengths based culture where staff feel encouraged, heard, supported and inspired. By doing this we are more likely to have staff satisfied in their jobs and striving to always do their best.

A strengths based culture is one where we are open and honest in our communication. Expectations about all aspects of work, performance, attitudes and behaviours are clear and so too are our rights and responsibilities. There is a shared vision and a shared responsibility for achieving that vision. Success is celebrated and good practice acknowledged.

A strengths based culture creates an environment where staff are clear about what is expected. Staff are encouraged to contribute to the overall wellbeing of the centre and they understand that their input is valued. Feedback and public acknowledgment of good practice create an environment of support, learning, challenge and inspiration. This promotes innovative practice, an increased sense of belonging and an overall feeling of job satisfaction.

Establishing a strengths based culture

Below are some practical ideas to assist in establishing a strengths based culture in your team.

Vision

- Establish a shared vision, ensuring the whole team contributes. Have a team planning day that starts with looking at the strengths everyone brings to the team. Work out how you all take part in monitoring how well the vision is being achieved.

Decision-Making

- Develop clear, transparent decision-making processes so that everyone knows how decisions are made and how they can be personally involved in the process. "Where, rights, responsibilities and bottom lines are clear, transparent and agreed" (McCashen, pg 127).
- Ensure decisions are fair and just and guided by "values that recognise the intrinsic worth of others, the right of people to control their own destiny and their right to make real, life-enhancing choices" (McCashen, pg 129). This could involve a team meeting focused on developing an agreed decision-making process, based on a list of questions e.g. How does our decision recognise and value people's strengths and capacities? Have we consulted widely enough? Does this decision discriminate against anyone?

Dealing with dilemmas

- Use the column approach (described in Sharing the Learnings, Issue 1) when working through a dilemma or challenge.

Your feedback is important to us!

Let us know what you have found useful or not so useful about this newsletter or what you would like to see more of.

Share your learnings with us!

If you want to share any learnings, books, or resources you've discovered we would love to hear from you.

Contact Karen Andrews so we can include your learnings.

strengths

Feedback and Acknowledgment

- Have regular individual sessions with staff to talk about what they are doing well and what challenges they are facing. Identify what motivates individual staff and how they personally measure their success. Give feedback about their strengths and capacities. This builds a culture of noticing strengths in the team.
- Start meetings by identifying what's been going well. Focusing on what is working allows people to experience a sense of success. This focus encourages us to do more of what is working. It is motivational and supports innovation and creativity in a supportive environment where people feel able to take risks and try new things.



Initiative and Innovation

- Provide ways for staff to take on responsibility for service delivery, internal decision-making and operations. Try forming teams that can take on responsibility for planning, implementing and monitoring part of the accreditation reporting process.
- Support and encourage staff to take initiative to explore new ground and test new ideas. Include public acknowledgments of achievements and strengths in the staff diary or develop an appreciation journal.

Transparency

- Ensure meeting records and any decisions made are accessible to all participants involved. This introduces transparency and clarity.

Creating a strengths based culture involves putting into action the “principles, processes and skills of the strengths approach into organisational contexts, processes, decision-making, directions and policies” (McCashen, pg 125) It also requires commitment and leadership. We have to reflect on how we operate, look at our policies and procedures, think about the way we manage conflict in teams and how we manage performance issues. When we are operating from a strengths perspective we are applying a set of beliefs to the way we interact with others. McCashen identifies these beliefs as including:

- All people have strengths and capacities
- People can change. Given the right conditions and resources people’s capacity to learn and grow can be harnessed and mobilised
- People change and grow through their strengths and capacities
- People are the experts on their own situations
- The problem is the problem; the person is not the problem
- Problems can blind people from noticing and appreciating their strengths and capacity to find their own solutions
- People have good intentions
- People are doing the best they can

References/resources

McCashen, W., *The strengths approach; a strengths-based resource for sharing power and creating change*, St Lukes Innovative Resources, 2005

Neugebauer, R., “12 reasons people love to work for you”, *Child Care Information Exchange*, Issue 168, March/April 2006, pp 48-50

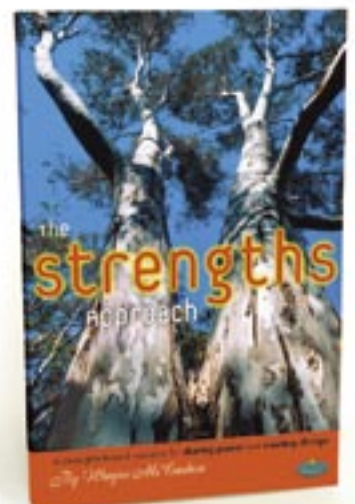
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Having a shared vision: a way to build a culture of reflection

This article explores ways we can develop reflective teams where staff work collaboratively and a culture of continuous learning prevails. It encourages key people in teams to look at ways of developing a shared vision that guides and acknowledges both the children and the adults as learners and offers some ways of doing this.

Key people within our teams (management, director, team leaders) need to inspire and lead and create opportunities where all involved can imagine and visualise future possibilities. This means creating opportunities for teams to develop a picture of what the service could look like in the future and what could be different, as well as looking at what roles staff can play in achieving this vision. Often we get caught up in the here and now and never dedicate time to dream of the future vision. It is easy to get bogged down with everyday challenges. Making time to focus on the future helps to develop a culture of collaboration and enthusiasm and fosters a learning environment for the staff, the children and families.

Establishing a team culture of reflective practice allows staff to collectively develop a shared vision. This shared vision guides us and acknowledges the importance of both the children and the adults as learners in the service. All staff need to know what the vision is for the service so they can see how the work they are doing now contributes to that vision being achieved. Has your team spent time brainstorming and articulating what your service's collective vision is? This is the first step to developing a culture of learning and reflection in your service. You could use the column approach together as a team to develop the vision for your service.

The issue	Picture of the future	Your strengths and resources	External strengths and resources	First steps
What are the issues for your service? (You may need to separate these and use different columns for each).	If the issue were resolved what would be happening? Ask yourself the miracle question.	Spend time identifying the strengths and resources you can put towards developing a 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.

To stimulate the team about creating a vision you could try:

1. Talking about childhood memories and unpacking the themes. What are they telling you about the kind of environment you want in your service?
2. Deciding on themes that the team would like included in the program for staff, children and families (what are their **dreams** and hopes for the service that they would like to be part of?).
3. Ask families about their **dreams** for their children – this could be done on the enrolment form or in a face to face conversation.
4. Jot down words to describe what your vision would feel like, look like, sound like and smell like.

Spend time talking, thinking, listening and reflecting to allow your vision to begin to be articulated. Take the time to document this and make it accessible to all, including children and families. See Carter, M.,



reflecting

& Curtis, D (1998). *Visionary director: A handbook for dreaming, organizing and improvising in your centre*. St Paul: Redleaf Press for these and other ideas on how to build a vision with your team.

Staff as adult learners

Creating a vision with our team in a collaborative fashion does not automatically result in a motivated and energised staff team. The thing we need to remember is that adults learn in similar ways to children – they need time, it needs to be meaningful and it needs to meet their needs. Some tips in creating this thirst for learning in the team include providing:

- An environment where staff feel they belong, are accepted and respected
- Openings for diverse learning styles
- Opportunities for staff to set their own goals and assess their practices
- A safe environment where innovation and risk taking (moving out of our comfort zone) is encouraged
- An environment where staff feel trust has been established
- Opportunities for staff to meet, talk, brainstorm, listen and reflect on their learnings. Staff/team meetings can be an ideal place for these conversations. Some of the strengths resources that help with identifying our own, and our colleagues', strengths can also support these conversations
- Ways for individual passions and strengths to be nurtured (through resources and/or training)
- Feedback about their attempts and professional growth (this is where some of the strengths resources could be used very effectively)
- Regular performance reviews for all staff
- Staff meetings that focus on staff development and realising the vision
- Time for staff to practise new skills or knowledge learned
- Time in staff meetings for reflective practice – discussions and brainstorming about what is going well, what could be going better
- Time in the program for staff to practise reflection (eg. providing them with a reflective journal with key questions to stimulate their reflections)
- Time and space for existing staff to be mentors to new staff
- Ensuring those in leadership roles (management, director, team leader) have time to listen to staff
- An environment where the leader can delegate tasks as a way of empowering staff to accomplish new learnings
- Informal 'get togethers' where staff can unwind, get to know each other and build trusting and respectful relationships
- Ways to bring individual staff member's efforts to the attention of the rest of the team and showing interest/enthusiasm in what they are doing (eg. implementing a new idea/strategy)
- Help and support when it is needed or requested.

To sum up

It takes time to build a team that values reflective practice. Developing a shared vision is a good beginning. This can empower and enthuse staff to see the world differently and encourage them to begin to work towards achieving that vision.

If these tips are what you see as part of your service's 'picture of the future' try using the column approach to develop a plan for how you are going to get there. Getting the team involved in this process will result in a broader range of strategies developed as well as a stronger commitment to enacting these.

References/ Resources

Carter, M., & Curtis, D (1998), *Visionary director: A handbook for dreaming, organizing and improvising in your centre*. St Paul: Redleaf Press.

Rodd, J. (2006), *Leadership in Early Childhood* (3rd ed.). Sydney, NSW: Allen and Unwin.

Neugebauer, R., & Neugebauer, B. (Eds) (1998), *The art of leadership: Managing early childhood organizations, volume 2*. Redmond, WA: Child Care Information Exchange.

Bacon, T.R. (2006), *What People Want: A Manager's Guide For Building Relationships That Work*. USA: Davies-Black Publishing.

Strengths based tools in action:

Using journals to build strengths in teams

The following ideas can be incorporated into day-to-day practice.

Appreciation Journal – a glance at staff, a look at quality

Vanessa developed an appreciation journal to support staff. “The service had been through a lot of changes and team morale was pretty low. I needed to find a way to support the team to focus on the good things they were doing and to highlight their strengths.”

Team members were already implementing a new way of documenting children’s experiences using learning stories. Vanessa saw an opportunity to use the new documentation as a model for reflecting on what the team was doing well. She developed what later became an ‘appreciation journal’. Her advice is:

- 1) Identify the key elements of ‘the professional’ you want to develop or enhance, such as quality interactions with children and team work. This can come from the curriculum framework.
- 2) Spend time noticing when team members demonstrate these qualities and record what you see, how it relates to the particular elements of ‘the professional’ and what you appreciate about this.

One area Vanessa focussed on was great team work. When she noticed this occurring she documented it, for example:

Introducing a new routine at lunch time. Ideas discussed and thoughts voiced to collectively come up with a routine, the new routine described and then a description of what happened when the new routine was implemented. In this description, it highlighted the team work that occurred to make this new routine run smoothly, demonstrating cooperation and commitment in improving areas of the daily routine.

When she saw staff demonstrating quality interactions with children again she documented these:

A one on one interaction using musical instruments shows a developing relationship between child and carer the activity sparks others to join in and the worker stays in the moment while inviting them to join in. This created an opportunity to become involved in what the children were doing and enhance the relationships between the children and the worker.

- 3) Use photos and stories throughout the journal that provide ways of publicly acknowledging good practice.
- 4) Pose questions throughout to encourage staff to reflect on their practice.

Vanessa’s simple ‘appreciation journal’ was presented to the team at the beginning of the year to publicly celebrate their good work and to spark enthusiasm for the start of a new year. Staff are now encouraged to write their own reflections in the journal.

Team Acknowledgment

Danielle developed a different way of acknowledging her team. She invited them to use the staff diary to record things they wanted to acknowledge about the team. She started with her own acknowledgment and provided a simple guide. Over time staff have regularly contributed to the journal. Some of the entries have been about the overall team and some have been about the room team or individuals. All the entries reflect the strengths of the team. As a result, one room team also starts their meetings by focusing on what is going well and a strong sense of team is being developed.

These simple ideas provide opportunities to highlight good practice and to develop a language that values the work of early childhood staff. They also provide documentation of the work that could be shared with families or used for other licensing or accreditation purposes.



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