

Evaluation of The Benevolent Society's Brighter Futures program



Brighter Futures is a voluntary program that supports vulnerable families in New South Wales, where children are at risk of abuse or neglect. It is delivered by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services and 16 non-government organisations, including The Benevolent Society.

Shortly after Brighter Futures began in 2003, the Social Policy and Research Centre at the University of New South Wales was commissioned to evaluate the program. The Benevolent Society also commissioned the Social Policy Research Centre to undertake additional analysis in relation to the families that it supports.

This research snapshot presents the key findings of the evaluation undertaken for The Benevolent Society.

KEY POINTS

- Between 2003 and the end of 2009, The Benevolent Society provided support to 904 families.
- The most common vulnerabilities reported by families when they entered the program were a lack of social support and problems with parenting.
- Participant families generally had low levels of income, employment and educational attainment and a heavy reliance on government benefits as the sole source of income.
- Just over one fifth of all families supported by The Benevolent Society were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.
- Brighter Futures appears to be having a positive impact on the lives of participant families.
- There were improvements in children's social and emotional development and in parent's self esteem, satisfaction with life and feelings of being supported.
- Reports to the NSW Child Protection Helpline about risk of harm declined, most notably for reports relating to parent or carer mental health issues and drug/alcohol misuse.
- Families who participated in the program for longer were more likely to have better outcomes.

ABOUT BRIGHTER FUTURES

Brighter Futures provides targeted support to vulnerable children and families for up to two years to prevent problems reaching crisis point.

The program is targeted at pregnant women and families with children aged less than nine years, who are experiencing certain vulnerabilities and require long-term support from a range of services. These vulnerabilities are:

- domestic violence
- parental drug and alcohol misuse
- parental mental health issues
- lack of social support
- parents with learning difficulties or an intellectual disability
- child behaviour management problems
- inadequate supervision or lack of parenting skills.

Priority is given to families with children under three years as research has consistently shown that the first three years of life is a critical period for brain developmentⁱ and for the development of the infant-parent relationship.ⁱⁱ

Families can receive support from Brighter Futures after a referral from the NSW Child Protection Helpline, a community agency or individual, or an Aboriginal Maternal Infant Health Strategy service.

Participating families are offered a range of services and supports including case management and at least two of the following services:

- structured home visiting
- group based parenting programs
- quality children's services.

The Benevolent Society delivers the Brighter Futures program in sixteen locations across five NSW regions: North Ryde, Mudgee, Parkes, Orange, Lithgow, Bathurst, Moree-Inverell, Armidale, Tenterfield, Tamworth, Bankstown, Fairfield, Liverpool, Rutherford, Muswellbrook, Cessnock.

The Program aims to:

- reduce child abuse and neglect by reducing the likelihood of family problems escalating into crisis within the child protection system
- achieve long term benefits for children by improving intellectual development, educational outcomes and employment chances
- improve parent-child relationships and the capacity of parents to build positive relationships and raise stronger, healthier children
- break inter-generational cycles of disadvantage
- reduce demand for services that otherwise might be needed down the track such as child protection, corrective or mental health services.

THE AIM OF THE EVALUATION

The overall aim of the evaluation was to explore whether the Brighter Futures program improved outcomes for the children and families being supported by The Benevolent Society.

METHODOLOGY

To answer this question, the evaluation analysed data from the Family Survey, Risk of Harm reports and Community Services' administrative data files.

The Family Survey is a longitudinal survey designed to measure a family's progress on Brighter Futures, focusing on any changes in family functioning, parenting skills and parental wellbeing, and child social/emotional development. Data was collected on three occasions: at program entry, after six months and on exit.

Risk of Harm reports are notifications of suspected abuse or neglect made by members of the public or mandatory reporters to the NSW Child Protection Helpline. Risk of Harm Reports were monitored to assess if there had been a

ⁱ McCain & Mustard (2002) cited in Social Policy Research Centre (2010), The Evaluation of Brighter Futures, NSW Community Services' Early Intervention Program Final Report.

ⁱⁱ Guterman (2001) cited in Social Policy Research Centre (2010), The Evaluation of Brighter Futures, NSW Community Services' Early Intervention Program Final Report.

reduction in the number of reports of child abuse and neglect to the NSW Child Protection Helpline.

Administrative data files with information on participant families and the delivery of the program were also analysed.

THE FINDINGS

About the families

- The evaluation found that there was an over-representation of families with a lone-mother and that the majority of families on the program had multiple, and often entrenched, problems.
- The most common vulnerabilities reported by the families themselves when they entered the program were a lack of social support and 'inadequate parenting skills and/or supervision'.
- Around three quarters of the families had at least one child who had been reported to the NSW Child Protection Helpline prior to program entry.
- The average number of reports for these families was 10.3 reports relating to an average of 2.3 children.
- More than half the families had been reported to the Helpline because of domestic violence (55%). Over 40% of families had been reported for carer mental health issues and a quarter for drug and/or alcohol misuse.
- The evaluation showed that a higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families reported vulnerabilities associated with domestic violence, alcohol/drug issues and parenting problems.
- A higher proportion of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families reported vulnerabilities associated with carer mental health and child behaviour problems.
- Only 51% of fathers and 14% of mothers were in paid employment. Education attainment levels were similarly low, with approximately half of all families not having anyone with a Year 12 certificate.
- The evaluation, however, found that a lack of support had more impact on parent or carer wellbeing than socio-economic factors.
- There was also a clear link between parent or carer wellbeing and parenting practices. Those

who reported lower satisfaction with life and lower levels of self esteem, displayed more negative parenting practices.

- Negative parenting practices were in turn linked with problem behaviours in children.

Across the regions

Central West

- 28.5% of families were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- Families had an average of 2.5 children (0 – 17 years)
- Only 37% of fathers were in paid employment
- Over 66% of families had been reported for domestic violence

New England

- 48.1% of families were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- Families had an average of 2.8 children (0 – 17 years)
- 73% of families had been reported for domestic violence

North Sydney

- Families had an average of 1.9 children (0 – 17 years)
- Over half the families had been reported for mental health issues

South Western Sydney

- Families had an average of 2.6 children (0 – 17 years)
- 75% of families in Bankstown and 78% of families in Fairfield were from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds
- Nearly 50% of families had been reported for domestic violence

Upper and Lower Hunter

- 24% of families were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- Families had an average of 2.4 children (0 – 17 years)
- Over half the families had been reported for abuse

Length of participation

- The average length of time families spent in the program was 12 months. 40% of families stayed for more than two years.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families averaged nine months while non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families averaged 13 months.
- Families that reported, upon program entry, that they had carer drug and alcohol misuse and child behaviour problems as vulnerabilities spent on average less time in the program.
- Families who entered the program reporting a vulnerability associated with carer mental health issues were less likely to exit the program early.
- 28% of families who had exited the program did so within three months of entry.

Case plan goals

- During the evaluation period, nearly 60% of the families had achieved their case plan goals when they left Brighter Futures.
- There was a clear link between the length of time parents spent on the program and the likelihood of them achieving their case plan goals.
- A significantly higher proportion of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families were found to achieve their case plan goals in comparison to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Out-of-home care

- The evaluation of the entire Brighter Futures program found that children from families who successfully completed the program were less likely to go into out-of-home care.ⁱⁱⁱ

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Brighter Futures appears to be successfully supporting many families to achieve positive outcomes and prevent their escalation in the child protection system. The evaluation also clearly highlighted that the majority of participant families had multiple and complex issues, and that there

was considerable variation among families in terms of duration in the program and achievement of case plan goals.

While ongoing research and evaluation is needed to explore these issues further, the results do highlight a number of ways in which Brighter Futures could be strengthened as well as implications for practice.

Policy implications

Service delivery model

The evaluation results clearly show that the majority of families participating in the program have multiple and often entrenched problems at the child protection, rather than early intervention, end of the spectrum. There is a need therefore for additional supports and services for the high proportion of families experiencing drug and alcohol, mental health and domestic violence issues.

This finding also has implications for staff training and skill development as additional training and support may be needed to assist practitioners to address the complexity of these families.

It also highlights the need for a streamlined referral pathway back to Community Services, if problems escalate and there is a risk of significant harm to a child or children, to ensure continuity of support.

Integrated case management

The situation for these families is often complicated by other factors such as having large numbers of children, economic and housing stressors, cultural factors, immigration status (refugee etc) and living in regional or remote area.

As these issues span multiple government agencies, the introduction of an integrated case management model, which involves greater collaboration between the relevant multiple government agencies and NGO service providers, would be beneficial. A single family case plan would help to avoid duplication and enable more seamless access to services.

ⁱⁱⁱ Social Policy Research Centre (2010), The Evaluation of Brighter Futures, NSW Community Services' Early Intervention Program Final Report.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families averaged only nine months on the program.

There are a number of possible reasons for this. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families reported vulnerabilities associated with domestic violence and alcohol/drug issues which may be more difficult to deal with as part of an early intervention program. As well, the program model is not responsive to the mobile nature of many of these families.

To improve support for these families Brighter Futures should provide seamless access to culturally appropriate and evidence-based services that address domestic violence and alcohol and drug misuse. The program should also be more flexible and allow families to self-refer and easily transfer between Brighter Futures programs throughout the State.

Evaluation

If we are to better understand the barriers to program participation and identify the most effective ways of supporting these families ongoing research and evaluation is crucial.

Practice implications

Engagement and retention strategies

The evaluation found a clear link between duration in the program and achievement of case plan goals.

To help increase families' length of time in the program there are a number of strategies practitioners can use to promote engagement and retention. In the first instance, clarifying the expectations of the referral agency and of the family prior to entry into the program may help to determine the suitability of Brighter Futures to address their needs.

Where appropriate, practitioners should use available resources to gather information about

families to reduce the need for families to tell their stories multiple times to different agencies.

During the case planning phase, it is important that clear goals and outcomes are established in partnership with the family, in relation to what needs to change for the child and how parents can work towards these goals. Breaking the goals into 'small' achievable steps and celebrating the successes along the way is also very important to maintain a family's motivation and engagement.

Research shows that struggling families are only able to focus on making difficult changes if their basic material needs are met.^{iv} Where possible, therefore, practitioners should deal immediately with pressing material needs, for example, organising the repair of a broken fridge.

Ultimately, the strongest determinant of good outcomes is the quality of the relationship between the practitioner and the family.

The Benevolent Society's approach to working with families with multiple and complex needs

When working with families, The Benevolent Society uses the 'domains of resilience' model during assessment and intervention. The model helps to guide interventions that will increase protective factors and potential sources of family strength, as well as addressing the problems and risk factors.

In practice this means that when considering how to assess and boost resilience in a child's life practitioners focus on three levels: the child, their family relationships and the wider community.

The Benevolent Society (2011), Practice Guide 1: Cumulative Harm

Ultimately the effectiveness of the intervention is measured in terms of what has changed for the child.

^{iv} The Benevolent Society (2005), Building resilience: The Benevolent Society's approach to working with vulnerable children and families.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

When working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, cultural competence, sensitivity and respect are essential. It is important to build trust with families in order to develop positive, productive, equal relationships. Practitioners should make sure families feel heard and commitments and agreements made to families are honoured.

Developing partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and working collaboratively with them to deliver services may also be beneficial.

Parental or carer wellbeing

The analyses of carer wellbeing showed that primary carers who reported a lack of support - either in general or from their family - were less likely to take time for themselves, more likely to report lower satisfaction with life, and averaged higher feelings of self-deprecation (feeling inferior/inadequate) and lower levels of positive esteem.

As carer wellbeing impacts on parenting practices and child outcomes, initiatives that promote social and peer networks and provide carers with support are important. Focusing on the person's talents and interests, practitioners can help to connect parents or carers with community activities and strengthen their informal support networks.

The policy and practice implications mentioned above reflect the views of The Benevolent Society.



Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the families who gave their time to participate in the evaluation of the Brighter Futures program.

The Benevolent Society

The Benevolent Society is Australia's oldest charity. Established in 1813 we have been caring for Australians and their communities for nearly 200 years. We are a secular, non-profit, independent organisation working to bring about positive social change in response to community needs. Our purpose is to create caring and inclusive communities and a just society.

The Evaluation of Brighter Futures NSW Community Services' Early Intervention Program: Final Report can be accessed at:
www.community.nsw.gov.au