

Childcare as a ‘hub’ of relationships – potential for some new models for children, families, childcare and welfare staff.

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Abstract

“Broadening the Vision” requires us to think about how different disciplines and different ways of understanding children’s behaviour might come together. As knowledge of the importance of the early years has increased, childcare and preschool settings have become a field of interest to many practitioners, researchers and policy makers. How can this setting be more fully utilised to improve the outcomes of vulnerable children? How can we better identify and work with families who are showing vulnerabilities that will magnify as the child ages? How can we help to provide pathways that improve the trajectory of children and families experiencing distress?

Introduction

One can understand the childcare setting as a ‘hub’ of relationships – between children; between children and carers; between parents and carers; between parents and parents and between the centre and the community. The ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner 1979) assists us in thinking about how we can strengthen these relationships. Work on attachment, emotional availability and resilience applied to the childcare setting can be very useful in seeking effective models.

The Benevolent Society has been involved in early intervention, child protection and long-day care services for over fifteen years. Over the last few years we have been trialling a range of models for early intervention in long-day care and preschool settings – in our own centres and in partnership with others.

This paper will share the experiences and outcomes of those pilot projects, based on two implementation models:

- The Inner City Model used attachment principles (Greenberg, Cicchetti & Cummings, 1990) in a preschool setting to promote a safe and secure community for children, staff and parents (Swan & Dolby: 2003).
- The Outer Urban Model used a family worker in a preschool setting in an outer urban area to build on the relationships between parents, children, staff, and the local community.

Although these two models involve different implementation strategies and have different outcomes, we believe that they offer complementary components to an emerging model of early intervention using a childcare centre as the operational base. The presentation will discuss theoretical frameworks and some of the issues and challenges of the convergence of multi-disciplinary teams in the childcare setting. Funding and partnership issues will also be raised.

Background

The projects were conducted in preschools operated by KU Children’s Services. They were located in public housing areas, supporting vulnerable families. Factors included single and young parents, drug and alcohol, domestic violence, parental isolation, low socio-economic circumstances and new immigrants.

Each project was tailored to meet the specific needs of the staff, children, families and community in that particular location.

Inner City model

The intervention that was implemented was relationship-based. “It used attachment principles which aimed to highlight the staff as a secure base for the children, thus enhancing their capacity to be emotionally available”(Swan & Dolby, 2003, p3)

“The concept of emotional availability is based in attachment theory and is considered vital in supporting children to learn to self regulate their emotions (Bowlby, 1982; Easterbrooks & Biringen, 2000” *ibid*:p3-4)

“Many of the children in the centre came from multi-problem families and experienced distressed relationships at home. The children’s conduct and developmental problems were a concern for staff, who also identified a need for parents to be supported in their daily lives and in their parenting role. Staff were experiencing considerable stress working long term with such vulnerable children and their families” *ibid*., p1).

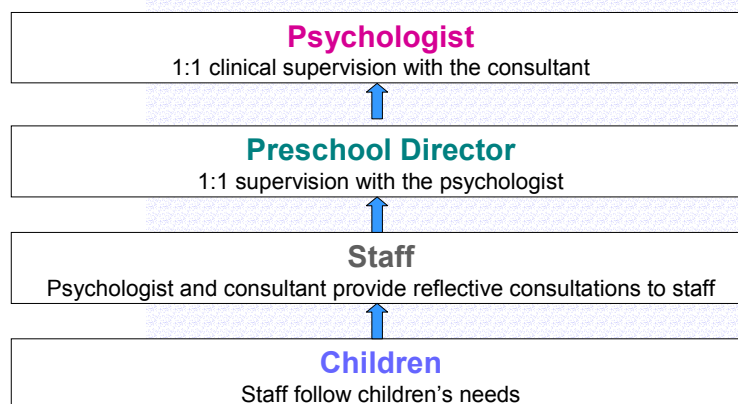
Methodology

The methodology was supervised and developed by Robyn Dolby and Belinda Swan, a Benevolent Society psychologist who conducted the interventions in two Inner City preschools. She attended one centre for 10 hours per week (over 4 days) during 2002. In 2003 the intervention was reduced to 4 hours and she attended another KUinner city preschool for 4 hours.

“The intervention was tailor made for preschool and childcare professionals. A key aspect was to provide secure base support across several relationship levels (see Figure 1). For example, the role of the psychologist was developed to support the staff to become more attuned to the children’s emotional needs and also to provide a secure emotional base for the staff themselves, as they managed distressing episodes with the children. She also provided individual support for the director and in turn had back-up for herself in the form of fortnightly supervision with the clinical consultant to the project.

Every 4-6 weeks the clinical consultant, the psychologist and the preschool staff met for reflective discussion sessions, based on staff video recordings of the children’s interactions with each other and themselves. The different levels of support aimed to help all staff to better understand the needs of the children, seek help from each other early and to maintain an open reflective stance” (Swan, Dolby & Croll, 2004, pp1-2, including diagram below).

Levels of Secure Base Support integral to the Intervention



The conceptual underpinning for the project came from Kobak and Esposito (2002), who give insight into the emotional needs of children in distressed versus secure family relationships; and from Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell (2002), whose Circle of Security Project has made attachment concepts accessible to parents and to the professionals who work with them” (Swan, Dolby & Croll, 2004, p2).

“The aim was to support staff to understand that the children's difficult and controlling behaviour was motivated by genuine needs. With this awareness they would be less likely to repeat aspects of distressed relationships that the children and parents might bring to them” *ibid*:p3). The pathway that was used to help the staff to become more emotionally available to the children (Hoffman, 2003).included:

- Developing an understanding of attachment concepts. using the Circle of Security (Marvin et al , 2002) as a road map to guide their observation of the different ways that the children came to and from them for support.” *ibid*:p4

- Creating an opportunity to observe the children's emotional development and for the children to experience the staff being more physically available to them.

For part of the day each staff member was asked to stay in one designated area (called a zone), such as the sand-pit or swings, and allow the children to come to and from them. The psychologist modelled maintaining a "zone" and were guided to focus on the different ways that the children sought connections with them and drew on their support”. *ibid*:4-5

This helped to provide a safe, predictable environment for the children, although it was an extremely difficult task. It also gave staff the opportunity to build on their individual relationship with each child, which meant they were better able to assist the children in negotiating relationships with their peers.

- ”Creating a reflective dialogue where the staff could talk with the psychologist about what they observed and what they felt themselves to be experiencing with the children.” (Swan & Dolby, 2003 p9)

The psychologist became the staff's own secure base – helping them to contain their feelings after a distressing episode with a child and allowing them to remain calm.

- ”Supporting parents in building relationships with their children.

The "zones" concept was extended to include parents. A chair was put out for parents beside the psychologist in her zone and parents were invited to sit down whenever they wanted to talk. This gave control to the parents, as they could approach the psychologist on an informal basis at their own instigation.” *ibid*:p12.)

- Group Consultation during Team Meetings and Formal Individual Supervision.

Clinical consultation/staff training sessions on attachment and its effects on behaviour in young children were conducted by Dr Robyn Dolby, using videos of interactions.

In addition, the Director attended a “mentor” group conducted by the support worker, engaging workers from neighbouring childcare services working with similar families.

Evaluation of Inner City Model

Tools used:

- Parent Development Interview (Pianta et al, 1995)
- Pre and post staff interviews/feedback and a parent feedback survey
- Caregiver-Teacher Report Form for Ages 1.5 to 5 years (C-TFR) (Achenbach, 1997).

Results:

- 62% of high-need children showed significant improvement in behaviour (N=13)
- 60% of children who had difficulty with emotional regulation (internalising or externalising difficulties) showed improvement (N=15)
- 83% of children who were part of the project over 2 years either maintained earlier gains or improved further in the second year, indicating a clear benefit to sustaining the project over the longer term (N=6)
- Staff highly rated the intervention in improving their understanding of children's emotions and in managing difficult behaviours and situations.
- Staff moved from thinking about the children in terms of control to instead think more about giving them emotional support.
- Staff became more positive about the children; clearly positive memories increased (77% gain) and questionable or negative memories decreased (64% reduction)
- 82% of parents felt that the zones had a settling effect on their children.
- Parents preferred speaking informally to the worker about their child's behaviour or about family issues, either privately or as part of parenting mornings.

“As discussed in *Neurons to Neighbourhoods* (Shonkoff, JP & Phillips, DA(eds.) (2000) the critical aspect of quality childcare is the relationship between the child and the staff member providing that care. Support, supervision and reflection time for staff is critical as they integrate this framework and focus on relationships. This intervention is not achieved by a “recipe” approach with the adult and child told what to do. It comes about through everyone finding their own way and having the support to do so and to problem solve together” (Swan & Dolby, 2002, p22).

“Results indicate that this approach strengthens the relationship between staff and children by giving the children an experience of calming down in the presence of an adult. This enables them to develop secure attachments and the child learns to manage its distress. These skills are vital in a child's development and will assist them in the school classroom and in their future relationships” *ibid*:

It appears that the psychologist's physical presence in the preschool enhances the engagement process of families as they develop trust and familiarity. Families responded to the psychologist because she was familiar with their child.

In 2003 the intervention was scaled back and offered for only 4 hours. A similar shortened intervention was conducted at another inner city KU preschool. While gains were observed in children's behaviour and emotional competence, staff were not able to easily sustain the notion of being a secure base for the children as their own support base had been significantly reduced.

Results suggested that a minimum of 10 hours within the centre is needed to sustain positive outcomes and that the intervention needs to continue for more than a year where families and children are experiencing significant vulnerability.

Outer Urban Model

In 2003, with a 1 year grant from Families First, The Benevolent Society initiated a further pilot project located in a KU Children's Services preschool in the outer western suburbs of Sydney. A family support worker was based at the centre for 21 hours per week.

This model aimed to support isolated and vulnerable families by engaging with members of the local community as well as the preschool parents and staff. The preschool setting provided an operational base in the community. Within the centre the worker connected and offered support to parents in an informal manner and empowered parents to seek assistance. Familiarity and trust assisted in the development of the program.

A "Play and Chat" community playgroup was established in the community centre next to the preschool and ran weekly. A collaborative approach was fostered and a partnership developed with Anglicare allowed 2 workers to attend each week and ensured success and sustainability.

Methodology

1. Support was provided for staff and parents on early childhood development and parenting issues and pathways to information and resources.

Guest speakers and requested topic discussions were provided at the playgroup and at parent coffee mornings in the centre. Information on specific issues re children and families was sought by the worker for staff as needed.

The centre information resource was expanded for staff and parents.

2. Positive and empathic interactions were promoted between parents, children and childcare workers.

A relationship focus was initially stimulated by a workshop with Robyn Dolby and was extended in regular, planned child-free reflection times with staff. This was supported by the Director

At the playgroup one worker focussed on providing information while the other focussed on modelling appropriate interactions and relationship building between children and parents. This was a very successful model.

3. Staff and parents were assisted with understanding individual children's behaviour.

The worker had access to permanent space in the centre where parents stated they felt supported to seek support on issues concerning them. Informal 1-1 counselling was available to parents from both communities in their relevant settings. Referrals were made when appropriate.

Staff were regularly consulted about issues relating to families in the centre and were encouraged to observe, reflect and discuss children in the context of their family and their community. (Garbarino & Eckenrode,(1997) .

Evaluation of Outer Urban Model

Tools used:

- Staff pre and post assessment (questionnaire and interview)
- Community parent (questionnaire and interview).
- Centre parents (questionnaire and interview)
- Anecdotal and process evaluation

Results:

- 100% of regular playgroup participants indicated that seeking friendship and information on parenting issues were the main reasons for attending (N=10 surveyed, N=15 in attendance regularly)
- 100% said that making friends had been achieved.
- 88% stated that they had improved their parenting skills and confidence, their interaction with their child, and had gained information on how to be a parent.
- While there was little change to factors of stress, general happiness, and ability to handle things well, 75% stated that they felt their feelings had changed about being a parent over the life of the group.

Anecdotal evidence strongly supports the notion that increased support to parents flows onto their children and thus benefits their development. The playgroup was clearly meeting its objectives of improving parenting skills and reducing isolation however it could not address the wider socio-economic issues pressing on the parents in the time frame available.

Most of the mothers involved in the project had a background of extreme social isolation. One young mother lived in her father's shed with her young child, who was initially assessed with delayed development. She had no contacts outside her father and step-mother and their children, and did not relate well to them. The playgroup has become a major source of friendship and support for this young woman, and her child is now behaving in developmentally appropriate ways.

Parents from the centre felt it was easier to connect with a worker who was primarily focused on their needs rather than on their child. They reported that they were beginning to use each other as resources, breaking down their feelings of isolation. One mother wrote *'I feel as though when I go home after meeting I have just had a massage. I'm relaxed and I feel good.... we go to (the worker's) talks and it helps us as a family in so many ways'*.

The group has not continued to meet in 2004 due to varied family commitments, but the Centre staff voiced awareness of the benefits of parent groups, and indicated their desire to continue.

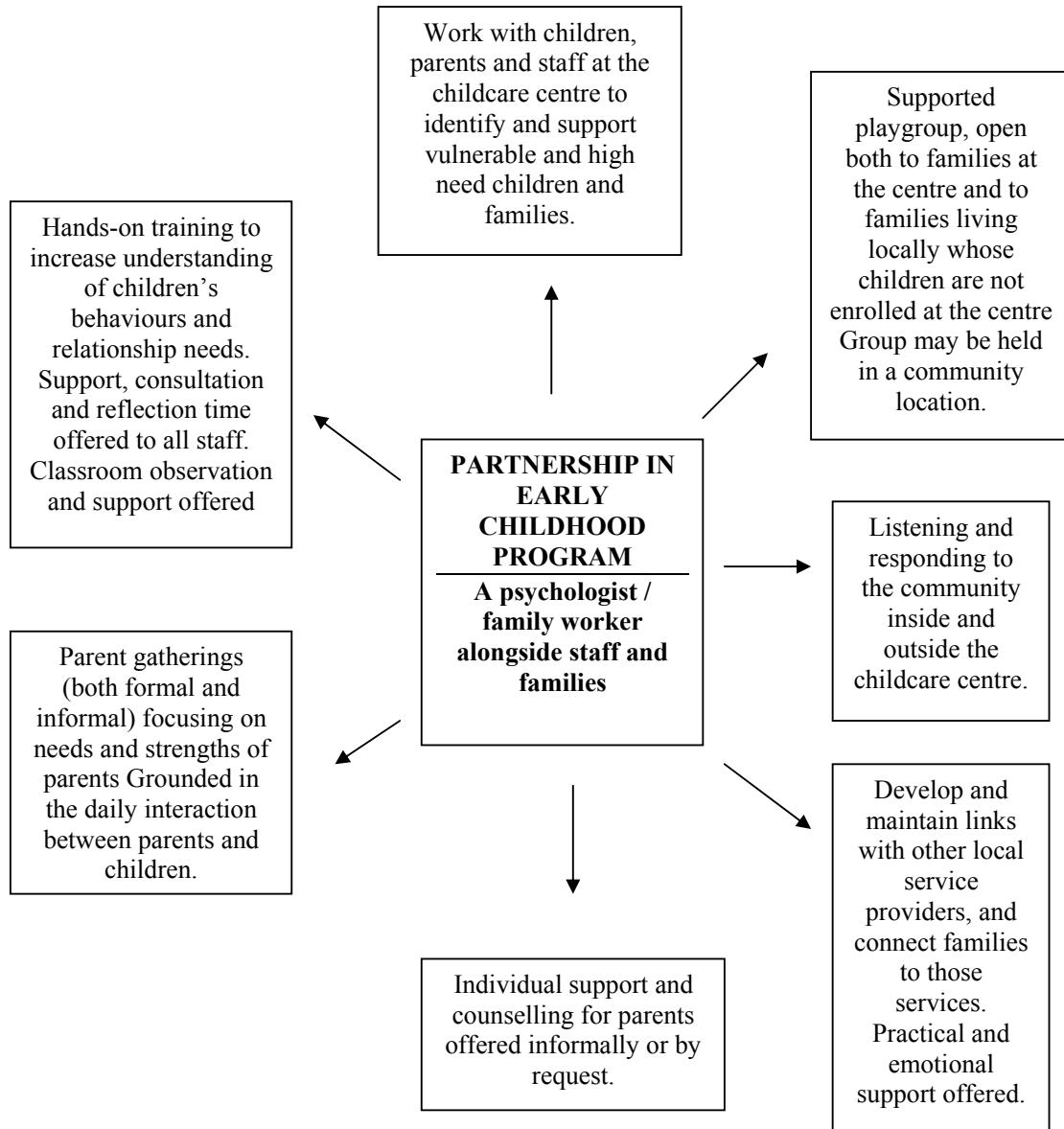
Conclusion

Our intervention model (see Figure 2) using childcare as an accessible, soft entry point to the community has proved to be worthy of replication. It offers an integrated approach to working with vulnerable families and fosters collaboration from workers and agencies. It is flexible and adaptable to meet the needs of the community. It brings attachment and ecological principles together in a working model for children's services, using the childcare setting as a 'hub' to promote connections between all local stakeholders – children families, staff and communities. .

We are currently growing our model on the central coast of NSW in a centre operated by Wyong Shire Council in an extremely vulnerable community. Discussions are well underway to implement shortly in South West Sydney.

Our Emerging Model

Figure 2



Background

The Benevolent Society

Established in 1813, The Benevolent Society is Australia's oldest non-profit organisation and has a long history of supporting individuals, families and communities, strengthening social networks and building individual and community capacity. Our approach to working with children and families is flexible and multilayered. Creating an integrated range of services and community networks is a vital aspect of our work.

Our services include:

- Early Intervention Program (EIP) – attached to the Royal Women's Hospital in Sydney offering long term ante and postnatal intervention to high risk families for 16 years.
- Child Protection Services – working with high-risk families and their children to reduce the effects of abuse and to break the cycle.
- Volunteer Home Visiting programs – supporting families experiencing additional stresses in the first year of their baby's life.
- PlayPower – a hands-on program providing resources and workshops to parents and professionals on developmentally appropriate activities to improve confidence and skills in building relationships with children .
- Early Childhood Centres – focussing on children's attachment needs, assisting the development of strong, healthy relationships.

Our Partnerships in Early Childhood Program has developed out of this experience.

Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC)

For several years, students from The Institute of Psychiatry under the supervision of Dr Robyn Dolby have visited The Benevolent Society's childcare centre in Woollahra (Sir Philip Baxter Childcare Centre) to learn more about relationships and emotional availability between children and staff using video as a medium.

In 2001 KU Children's Services invited us to provide an early intervention and support program to children, staff and families in an Inner City preschool. This was conducted in 2002 and 2003 .We extended the program to a second inner city preschool in 2003 and to an outer urban area in 2004, under the Families First Initiative. The consultant on the Inner City projects was Dr Robyn Dolby.

Each project was tailored to meet the specific needs of the staff, children, families and community in that particular location. Funding for these projects came from KU, Telstra Foundation and Families First.

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