

Sharing the Learnings

Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services Newsletter

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



Issue 4 **November 2007**

Welcome to Issue 4 of 'Sharing the Learnings'

Over the past few months the project has continued to look at the role children's services play in supporting families. Participants in the intensive professional development component of the project have begun looking at how to incorporate this into day-to-day practice. We have also reflected on ways to partner with families who are more difficult to engage. The participants in the intensive component have been trialling different, creative approaches and some of the successes of these interactions are documented on page 5 of this issue.

Your feedback is important. Let us know what you have found useful, or not useful, about this newsletter and 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'd love to hear from you.

Staff changes

Since the last newsletter there have been some changes in staffing. **Fay Hadley** left her position with Gowrie to take up a new position at Macquarie University. Fay brought to the project her energy and enthusiasm for trying new things, as well as her excellent writing and time management skills. Her positive attitude will be missed. We welcome **Hala Doris** from Gowrie to the project. She brings a wealth of experience in early childhood services and will be a great asset to the project.

Project Facilitator, **Janine Ahie**, has also joined us, to work with Aboriginal Children's Services in South East Sydney. Janine is located with The Benevolent Society in Bondi. Watch this space!

In this Issue:

Valuing the Strengths in families: What's important

Reflections on working with families' strengths

Showcase: Ways of connecting with hard to engage families

Project Coordinator

Karen Andrews
The Benevolent Society
(Mon, Tues, Wed)
t 9130 7336
m 0406 384 063
karenan@bensoc.org.au

Early Childhood Educator

Hala Doris
Lady Gowrie Child Centre
– Sydney
(Mon, Tue, Wed)
t 8345 7604
m 0412 113 386
hdoris@gowrie-sydney.com.au

See page 6 for more news.

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.

Valuing the strengths in families

“A child enters our schools with a story, a life in their family. If we keep the child at the centre of our work, we must consider her family, or we have an incomplete child.”

Maria Davoli, educator in the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy.



Families bring unique expertise and experience to the childcare environment. They are a valuable resource to early childhood professionals, as they provide us with updated information about their child, cultural practices and attitudes, norms, beliefs and customs that are relevant to their child/ren.

“The goal in creating relationships with families is to build respectful and mutual, partnerships. Partnerships enrich both teachers’ and families’ relationships with children and bring together their mutual expertise to the benefit of the child” (Keyser, 2006:8).

Working as professionals with families requires an ability to listen and to take on board different perspectives. As educators, we recognise the significance of parents in children’s lives, and the importance of the home environment in children’s development. It can be challenging for us as educators to bring these two worlds together in a meaningful way so that children feel emotionally secure and parents feel valued as well.

In theory, we know that working with parents is an integral part of our job as early childhood educators and research supports this. In reality this is challenging, and there can be real disharmony between parental expectations and those of early childhood educators. Often there is a lack of appreciation on both sides of the relationship of the expertise and experiences of the other.

Many of us engage in abstract and well-intentioned discussions of parent involvement and parent partnership, but putting this into practice can often be challenging. Our environments can often communicate a message to families to stay at the door so that we ‘receive’ their children to educate them. This can create barriers to true partnerships between our services and the families we work with. Early childhood services play a pivotal role in supporting families and need to make a conscious effort to ensure their philosophies and programs incorporate values and practices which reflect this.

When we show genuine interest in parents and value them as the most important people in children’s lives, we form the basis of trusting relationships. It is these trusting relationships which provide the framework for collaboration and partnering with families and in turn enhance the growth and development of children. When we recognise that every family has strengths and resources to resolve issues we become enablers in this process. We create partnerships in which differences and issues can be addressed.

McCashen says that:

“building a relationship of trust is the foundation for all respectful and constructive helping processes. This is facilitated by genuine interest in and validation of people’s experience, strengths, capacities and aspirations” (2005: 47).

strengths

Our role as professionals is to empower parents and we do this by working in partnership with families in the education of their children. These partnerships need the expertise of families and early childhood professionals, as each brings different skills and knowledge. Early childhood professionals have experience, education and training on child development and children in general. Families on the other hand know a lot about their individual children, their history, their own parenting styles and their family culture, values and belief.

The most significant contribution that we as educators can make to a child's life is to enhance parents understanding and appreciation of their child, increase their confidence in carrying out the challenging and enormously complex role of being parents, and ensure that they understand and value that they are the most important people in their child's life. Our practices, policies and philosophies must back up this ideology. We need to create opportunities and contexts for families to value the importance of their parenting roles. Helping families to recognise their abilities, capabilities and acknowledging their success with parenting is a way we can support and empower families.

There are many ways we can show families that we value their contributions and strengths. Creating opportunities for families and staff to work together, learn from each other and share knowledge and resources creates a shared focus. This means that the child's experience is built on inputs from both their family and their teacher.

Obstacles to partnerships being developed are often derived from everyday life stresses and tension. Recognising the things that get in the way of partnerships being developed can provide services with the opportunity to find ways to reduce and remove these barriers.

Some of the challenges to building partnerships that parents may be facing:

- Fear of being replaced by staff and demonstrating protective feelings
- Guilt about not providing all the care for their child/ren
- Perceived or actual sense of not being valued by the other
- Cultural differences
- Lack of time or job-related stress
- Unclear or differing expectations about appropriate roles for parents
- Feeling intimidated by staff and a lack of confidence in their role as a parent.

Some of the challenges to building partnerships that staff may be facing:

- Negative attitudes towards use of child care
- Lack of skill in relating to parents or absence of understanding of the importance of communication
- Low morale and low status image in the community and the impact of this on feelings of self-worth
- Breaches of confidentiality
- Lack of experience in building adult to adult relationships
- Feeling unappreciated for their expertise and the important role they play with children.

Building relationships is an ongoing task and is facilitated by regular and open communication. As we aim to create environments and programs that deeply respect children, we must create authentic partnership with their families that are built on genuine and respectful relationships.

Building partnerships is about

- understanding the other person's perspective
- engaging in two-way communication
- consulting with each other on important decision
- respecting and working through differences and opinions.



Reflecting on how we can value strengths in families



In early childhood services we are increasingly being asked by the community to take on a greater role in supporting families. Often we and our colleagues have had little or no training in responding to the complex issues families are facing in today's society and it can feel overwhelming. Reflecting on what we do know, what we feel competent and confident doing (our strengths) and what we don't know or feel less confident with (our weaknesses) allows us to develop and redefine how we work with families (our possibilities).

To help us enhance our skills and knowledge in working with families from a strengths based family centred approach it is important to create an environment that is conducive to reflecting on our work.

Firstly, the space must be created for you and your colleagues to have time to reflect and think about the ways you work with your families. In this space you can begin to discuss and brainstorm:

- what practices you are currently using in working with families?
- what is working?
- what are the frustrations or difficulties?

This allows us to develop a clear picture of the issues and what we are doing well and therefore should do more of, as well as the things we might need to find different ways of doing.

We could also look at the different expertise families and staff bring, for example:

Parent expertise:

- What do families know about their children?
- How much information do your families share with you?

Compare this with:

Early Childhood Expertise:

- What kind of knowledge and information do you have about children?
- Think about your training – What have you learned?

Once the team has had an opportunity to reflect on these things, a clear picture can be developed about the families accessing the service and their needs. It is also useful to consider including families in these conversations. This could be an informal discussion at pick up or drop off, or an invitation to chat about the issues or even a brief questionnaire. The method used isn't important (each service will feel one method is more appropriate than another) but what is important is to begin developing an understanding of the families' perspectives.

Some of the questions we used in Issue 3 of this newsletter (August 2007) may also be helpful in framing conversations with families that focus on their strengths and whether they feel valued in your service.

Keeping a reflective diary may be one way of tracking the positives, the challenges and the surprises that occur along the way in working with families. The reflective diary is often a valuable tool to look back on and see how far you have come.

Following up with the families you originally talked to may also provide some helpful feedback about how families are feeling valued.

When families feel valued by your service they are more likely to share information with you, participate in the service and work in partnership to enhance the learning and development environment of their children.

Useful questions to ask when talking with families could be:

- What parts of being a parent do they enjoy the most?
- What parts are the most challenging?
- What kind of support would be the most helpful?

Engaging hard to engage families – What works?

All of us from time to time have come across families that we find difficult to engage with. When we are struggling to connect we need to find different and creative approaches. At the learning circles we have been talking about how we give feedback to families, and that this is often an opportunity to connect with families.

Participants in the learning circles agreed to try out a new approach by targeting a family they had difficulty engaging with and to give them some positive feedback about their child/ren. The stories below are some of the positive results that occurred.

One service was not seeing Mum very often, as the child's grandmother usually did the drop off. The child has intense special needs and the service was struggling with ways to provide support to complement other support Mum was receiving. Staff were concerned that Mum was very down about all the negative feedback she was receiving from specialists. To show her some positives the service took a photo of the child doing "rock a bye bear" and made it into a photo board of the child's achievement. A worker dropped it off on her way home (as mum works in the shopping mall where the centre is located). She was very appreciative of the effort the service had gone to, as well as getting some positive feedback about her child. Staff in the service report that Mum is now sharing the specialist information with them and that she feels as though she is "getting somewhere" with her child.

In another service a child who attends one day a week was having difficulties settling in. A worker spoke to the Mum about the settling in procedure used in the centre and then followed this up the next week with a phone call to see how things was going. When the child had a good day, the worker rang Mum and gave her feedback about how settled the child was. The worker reported that the rapport with mum has improved, that she stays around more and seems to have more confidence in separating from her child.

Another service was struggling to connect with a family they wanted to support in getting their son assessed. The worker phoned Mum to share a good news story as a way of demonstrating that while there were concerns about her son's development, the service also saw the positive things the child could do. The mother has since agreed to have her son assessed.

Another service reports that one parent was always in a rush and the worker was worried they didn't feel confident in the childcare environment. The worker caught up with the parent in the morning and said the child had done some wonderful work and that she would get it out to show her later in the afternoon, as her child wanted to share it with her. The change in the parent was tangible, they stay around and seem more comfortable. The pick up is much less rushed and they are more chatty.

One service had a recently separated family. Mum always did the drop off/pick up so they had a good relationship with her. Mum was trying to bad mouth Dad to staff but the staff stayed neutral, steering conversations away from this by using active listening techniques, cutting off etc. The worker contacted Dad by phone and asked if he wanted to be added to the email list regarding his children. Next time he came in he smiled, took his time instead of rushing away and really appreciated being included. It is always important to confirm contact arrangements when working with families who have separated.

These stories demonstrate how we can have an impact on families and that if we view children in the context of their family and their community then it follows that we should include families and communities in our services. There will always be some families that are harder to engage than others, but it is our role to take the initiative and to try different things.



news

Parenting Coordination Project

The Benevolent Society's South East Sydney Parenting Coordination Project has established a framework for the coordination and promotion of parenting groups and programs for families with children aged 0–8 years across South East Sydney. The project works in collaboration with the Families NSW Strengthening Families, Resourcing Parents project in the Inner West to maintain an accessible and locally relevant web-based resource for parents and service providers. The website at www.resourcingparents.com provides information on parenting education and support in Sydney's Inner West & South East, including a calendar of events for parents.

Seeding Grants

The Parenting Coordination Project also administers Seeding Grants of up to \$3000 to support innovation and collaboration in the service network in the delivery of parenting programs. Local organisations can apply for grants through open Expression of Interest rounds. All the details including application forms and selection criteria are listed on the project website www.resourcingparents.com. Twenty-one grant applications were approved in the first round. The second round of grants closed at the end of September this year.

Further plans also include the development of a comprehensive South East Sydney Parenting Program database.

For further information contact Julie Katz, Parent Resource Coordinator, The Benevolent Society, t 02 9130 7336.

Email newsletter

Do you want to receive this newsletter electronically?

Email:

karenan@bensoc.org.au
to add your name to the mailing list.



For more information visit www.bensoc.org.au