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Building Resilient Families -Paper ID 191

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Mission Australia has been working with families for 140 years, providing support services and fostering resilience. The underlying aim of Mission Australia's work is to help individuals and communities strengthen and increase their capacity to help themselves. Mission Australia has always been about making a difference in people's lives. In all our services, we seek to achieve long term change for our clients. Mission Australia constantly evaluates its work in order to maximise its successful outcomes.

The family is one of the basic building blocks of the community, and strong families can build strong communities. With changes to family structures and increasing pressures and stresses on families, the support they need in difficult times is also changing. Building resilience or the ability of a family to 'bounce back' from the various hurdles in life is, therefore, very valuable. Despite the changes in the make up of families, they do still matter very much, with people describing the collapse of their family as one of the most distressing events to have happened to them.

So when we think of the typical Australian family, we need to ask ourselves what 'typical' means?

Previously, it was a fairly straightforward proposition: the average family was an intact nuclear family comprising two parents and a couple of children. The same is not so true today. Families are increasingly diverse, and while the predominant family type is still headed by two parents, the number of children in each family is shrinking and the nature of family relationships is also changing.

Generally, more children are currently living with only one full time carer. The latest Census data shows that, in 2001, there were 760 000 single parent families in Australia (1 in 6), in 1971, the number of single parent families was a mere 178 000 (1 in 17).

Family networks that previously provided support to each other are much smaller, or becoming non existent. In 1971, there were 3.3 people in each household, which has fallen to just 2.6 people in 2001. This dramatic fall has been attributed by the ABS to divorce, people delaying entering into marriage and an ageing population.

Interstate migration is also growing. People are moving interstate with increased frequency to take up new jobs, or to pursue a better lifestyle for themselves and their family. ABS data shows that during 1999-2000, 367 400 people are estimated to have moved interstate, 3% more than in the previous financial year, 6% more than ten years ago and 47% more than 20 years ago. Again this breaks the uncomplicated linkages to family and friendships for some, therefore increasing the risk of isolation from support networks.

In 1993, 10.8% of children living in couple families had neither parent employed. By 2001, this figure had dropped to 7.5%. This still means about 704 000 children aged 15 and under are growing up in families where no one works. Often, this is an intergenerational problem (Reference Group on Welfare Reform 2000). Meaning that there is no ongoing culture in some families that understands the benefits created in families where one or both parents work.

To better understand this data on how families have changed over the past decade, and how support needs have changed, (and therefore the implications on our service delivery), Mission Australia staff in our family centred services were asked what changes they have seen in the families they work with.

Staff have noted that the change from the traditional family of two parents and several children has become more socially acceptable. Single parent, same sex, blended families, and families with small numbers or no children are becoming more common and accepted.

“The concept of families has certainly altered. We work mainly with single female-headed households. There has also been an increase in single male headed families as well (could be due to changes in the legal system). We have assisted same sex couples. With indigenous families, a range of relatives are accepted as mother and father. This has remained constant. There are a few CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) families where older siblings take on the parent roles. Our service accepts the definition of the people we assist.”

Family service NSW

Staff who work in our services see family relationships being put under considerable pressure, with an increasing conflict between family and work commitments.

“There is more conflict between work and family life and women are increasingly having to balance these now that both parents need to work to sustain a family home and the income needed to support a family.”

Counseling service SA

Where both parents are working, staff commented that they have seen a rise in the participation of fathers in general domestic life with an increase in numbers of single fathers accessing services.

Staff noted an increase in the need for, and use of, childcare services in their area.

This also fits with other research, showing the relatively high work force participation of many parents: 65% of sole fathers, 52% of sole mothers and 59% of families having both parents in the workforce (Weston et al 2001). Reliance today on the extended family has dwindled. This is, partially, due to families living further from one another, and partially because of the search for sustainable employment and affordable housing.

“We have seen an increase in families utilising services that used to be able to access private rental and are no longer able to do so.” Mission Australia staff member, SA

Families are spending less time together as a family unit, with the time and economic pressures not only of work, but school, sports and other extra curricular activities taking precedence.

When we analysed the feedback from our services as to what pressures our clients faced in their day to day lives, we then looked at what things would make a family resilient to these pressures. In other words, we looked at what does help to make a strong family?

In the past, research on family relationships has focused on family problems. More recently, studies in Australia and overseas have realised the importance of re-framing the problem, to focus instead on what makes families strong: When we identify what makes a family strong, we can then work on specific areas.

In 1999, the Family Action Center (University of Newcastle) initiated the first Australian Families Strengths Research Project with funding from the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. The aim of this project was to determine which qualities Australians perceived as family strengths, and the language families used to describe these qualities. They came up with 8 strengths that help to define what makes a family resilient.

Communication – Open, honest, positive and frequent communication between family members.

Togetherness – the ‘invisible glue’ that helps to bond a family and give members a sense of belonging. An important aspect is the sharing of similar values, beliefs and morals.

Sharing activities – Strong families like sharing activities with each other.

Affection – Showing love, care, concern and interest for each other on a regular basis.

Support – Assisting, encouraging and reassuring each other. Families are seen as being strong when everyone feels equally comfortable in offering or asking for support.

Acceptance – Showing respect, understanding and appreciation for one another’s individuality and uniqueness.

Commitment – Showing dedication and loyalty to the family as a whole. Family comes first.

Resilience – This is the ability of a family to ‘bounce back’ after a period of crisis and adversity. Resilience is what keeps a family ‘together’ and includes the other seven traits.

(Geggie et al 2000)

When we asked staff which of the eight indicators of family resilience they work on with clients, all respondents indicated communication skills, with most programs run by staff incorporating four or more indicators.

In order of the frequency of their use in programs by staff, the eight indicators are:

Communication 100%

Acceptance 90%

Resilience 85%

Support 70%

Sharing 65%

Togetherness 45%

Commitment 40%

Affection 40%

Implications for Services

Increasingly, researchers such as Kinnear and practitioners working with families, are coming to the view that, instead of “trying to ensure family structure adheres to a preconceived ideal in the hope of greater ‘stability’, it is better to support all types of families in fulfilling parental functions competently, resolving disputes constructively and ensuring economic viability and community attachment” (Kinnear 2002). The challenge, therefore is for practitioners to review and amend their working practice or frame of reference so that we avoid pathologising the problem and focus instead on resourcing families in their ride along with the ups and downs of life.

Major issues facing families

Staff were asked to list the three major issues affecting families using their services. Financial issues and the breakdown of relationships inside the family unit were the most common.

The third most common was isolation, both physical and social. Other common problems were a lack of parenting skills, housing issues, under or unemployment, alcohol and other drug issues, and mental illness.

I will now spend some time on each of these.

Financial issues

It was commonly stated that families lack the available funds to provide for themselves (often seeking support in the form of food parcels, help with the payment of bills etc).

Staff also reported that many of the families using their services were unable to save money on their current income levels. The ease of access to credit which gives the illusion of more available money, and which is really more debt poses a great risk, especially when coupled with poor money management or budgeting skills. A financial crisis or any other heavy drain on the household finances may just tip people (even those actively engaged in the labour market) into financial hardship, which can then leaves them more susceptible to falling in to the poverty trap.

The impact of casual employment on families' weekly budgets is not easily predicted, resulting in significant difficulties for many to make ends meet. We are seeing more families as the result of unstable employment, and high housing costs. Long waiting lists for public housing forces families on low incomes into the private, and more expensive, rental market.

They reported high levels of debt amongst some, and some noted a distinct lack of financial management skills. According to the Hardship in Australia occasional paper, (ABS 2002) 3.1% of Australian households reported having experienced multiple hardship in the past 12 months. This means experiencing two or more of the following problems: going without a meal or heating because of a lack of money, having to pawn, or sell an item or seeking assistance from a community organisation like Mission Australia. This equates to 222 700 households, or 600 000 people, with more than one third of those people being children under 15. Many of these families identified by the ABS are those which seek help from Mission Australia and similar organisations.

Family breakdown

Relationships between parents, between parents and children, and the issues involved in 'blending' families were commonly mentioned by staff as those confronting their clients. Staff specifically commented on a growing lack of "family unity and harmony", mentioning that many families seeking support did not have the ability or skills to resolve internal family issues satisfactorily. They also see many families suffering intergenerational dysfunction and abuse of and by family members.

Staff have also generally commented on a growing lack of communication and commitment to the family system.

In our counseling service, our main presenting problems are behaviour management issues, domestic violence, marital problems and separation, grief and loss, language barriers, poor health and problems generally associated with poverty." Mission Australia manager, NSW

Isolation from community based as well as family based support

Staff frequently mentioned there is a lack of available social support systems for families, as well as access to childcare, good public transport and community services. Access to health services, lack of services for children with special needs, community recreation and other programs were also noted, as was the isolation of migrants, many of whom have families overseas.

How then can we improve family services

When asked to nominate how family services in general could be improved or changed to encourage greater family resilience, responses covered two broad areas: program improvement and a need for more resources for current programs.

We need to celebrate the positive value of families.

“Taking the focus off individual family members and treating families (where appropriate) as a holistic system, ie: work with young people and parents, individually and as a unit.” Mission Australia staff member, NSW

If research and services focus always on the ‘bad’, then that is all we will see. Services need to work with one another, across the board, and tailor support to an individual family’s need, rather than trying to fit the family into a particular service or program. **Furthermore, staff were adamant the problems will remain until the community and organisations working with families are more aware of the uniqueness of every family, and sees them as a whole entity –rather than just individuals with ‘problems’.**

Staff also spoke of the need for more funding for parenting programs as well as early intervention and prevention programs. As long with more funding for current programs, more funding is needed to allow staff to provide the post program support for extended periods in some cases that is needed for families to cope on their own.

“Often, it takes families up to two years to find some stability and I believe ongoing support is necessary as families go through changes with children, teenagers and into adulthood.” Mission Australia staff member, QLD

This again raises the age old problem of where does the funding go, in to crisis support or prevention rather than building a continuum of support services.

When we are able to tackle issues before they become insurmountable, we can foster family resilience and further empower families to speak out on their own behalf.

“Promoting and celebrating the positive value and contribution of families in our community is also critical.”

Mission Australia staff member, NSW

The way forward

We at Mission Australia do struggle with these issues and are not holding ourselves out to be the experts. Rather we look at what we do, how we do it and then try new approaches to better assist our service users. When asked what they saw as the key to fostering family resilience, staff suggested that family services need to be better aligned with schools. School can be one of the main places where the impact of family stress is regularly seen- in things such as attendance patterns and general classroom management issues. Services need to work more effectively with one another, across the board, so that assistance is meaningful and not patchwork. This relies on a lack of competitiveness and a genuine commitment to cooperation. This is sometimes undermined by the way in which funding and tendering processes work.

“We are often too keen to exit people from our support services so we can stack up the outcomes.” Support Service Queensland

We believe programs delivered specifically to young people, to give them coping skills and improve self esteem, will enhance levels of personal resilience before they begin their own families.

Other ideas that we have identified include early intervention strategies aiming to resolve problems before they become too entrenched, positive parenting programs that give parents and young people the capacity to respond to their own problems, and other programs that focus on self expression, conflict resolution or mediation.

More targeted information, and efficient referral processes are needed within the community so families in need know the support services available to them and that they can get the assistance they require. On talking with clients workers noted that they are not all aware of the services that people provide within their local area.

Post exit programs are also important, to monitor and track progress and provide the ongoing support needed by families through their rebuilding process. This provides that all important link back to support services that can be accessed if things start to get difficult again.

Childcare centres have become an integral part of our communities, with many parents relying heavily on these services to allow them to continue in the workforce. Centres need to be highly flexible, open outside business hours and located near to where parents work. Increased childcare places are vital to support unemployed families (particularly women) to find employment. This is a critical issue for the large number of families where

no one is employed. The trend towards mutual obligation for parents receiving benefits who have children 5-16 also makes this a particularly important issue.

Family resilience is not the sole responsibility of any one section of society. Mission Australia advocates for inclusive family friendly policies from Government, businesses, as well as community services.

Governments can:

- Pay more attention to programs that reduce the number of jobless families.
- Provide more resources to programs that specifically provide assistance for families.
- Increase funding for programs, enabling long term monitoring and support when families exit programs.
- Provide support for all families, regardless of their structure. This should include support for paid maternity leave, more funding for child care centres, affordable housing initiatives and specialised employment services
- Take more risks in funding new programs and shifting towards a model of a continuum of support.

Businesses can:

- Allow more flexibility in working hours and location, especially during times of known family demand eg school holidays.
- Provide less casual and more permanent part time hours.
- Employment options so families can plan and manage their incomes more effectively.
- Medium to large businesses should provide on site child care.
- Small businesses should work with local councils to provide co-operative style child care arrangements.

Communities can:

- Provide services that are open more flexible hours to cater for shift workers.
- Develop family support groups that provide parenting information and skills.
- Provide a range of community, sport, and leisure activities designed to engage families together.

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