



POLICY BRIEF

Translating early childhood research evidence to inform policy and practice

Effective community-based services

This Policy Brief explores what makes community-based services for children and families effective. It identifies interpersonal and structural features that characterise effective services, and shows that how services are delivered is as important as what is delivered.

Why is this issue important?

Concern about the effectiveness of services for young children and families is based upon a range of factors. The evidence for the importance of the early years, and the difficulty in breaking free from adverse circumstances and poor developmental trajectories established during this period (CCCH, Policy Brief 1, 2006a), supports the need for effective services to be available to young children and their families. Without such help, many children who start off poorly will struggle to do well later.

There are signs of worsening or unacceptably poor health and well-being outcomes among young people (CCCH, Policy Brief 4, 2006b; Keating & Hertzman, 1999; Stanley et al, 2005). These poor outcomes have associated costs that are a significant drain on public resources (Heckman,; Kids First Foundation, 2003). To counteract these adverse effects, services need to be as effective and efficient as possible. They need to be non-stigmatising and readily accessible by hard-to-reach families so that emerging problems can be addressed before they become acute.

“How services are delivered is as important as what is delivered.”

What does the research tell us?

The research evidence indicates there are interpersonal and structural features of effective services for young children and their families. In other words how services are delivered is as important as what is delivered (Bruner, 2004; Pawl & St. John, 1998).

Interpersonal features – how services are delivered

Families vary greatly in their personal resources, levels of education, and confidence. Effective services take account of this, beginning with the parents' own perceptions and experiences of their situation, and basing service on what parents are capable of contributing. Services that do not take these factors into consideration are likely to fail to engage families fully and also run the risk of doing harm by placing inappropriate demands upon them. Effective services also start where families are at developmentally (Beresford & Hoban, 2005; Halpern, 2000). When service providers and families work collaboratively to identify family goals and priorities, services are more likely to address families' most salient needs. When professionals determine what the goals of an intervention should be, the issues that are most important for families and have most impact on their lives may be overlooked.

Effective services should be based upon the needs and priorities of families. This is one of the core features of family-centred practice (Dunst, 1997; Moore & Larkin, 2006; Rosenbaum et al, 1998). Effective services are individualised and responsive to particular family needs and circumstances (Dunst, 1997; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Simeonsson, 2000). They do not offer a fixed model to all families, regardless of their preferences and circumstances. One-size-fits-all approaches fail to adapt to the needs of particular children and families and are therefore less effective (Scott et al, 2006).

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Effective services seek to build partnerships with parents and communities. When service providers and families work as partners to determine what action should be taken, there is a greater probability that the desired outcomes will be achieved (Silberberg, 2001; Turnbull et al, 2000; Weissbourd, 2000). When decisions about goals and actions are made by professionals, they are less likely to be realisable given the context of the circumstances in which the family lives. Effective services also seek to empower families and communities, enhancing their ability to solve problems for themselves (Saleebey, 2006; Turnbull et al, 2000). Programs that employ empowerment practices have been shown to have a more positive impact on family well-being and functioning (Trivette & Dunst, 2005). Services that adopt a strengths based approach are also more effective (Bond & Carmola Hauf, 2004; Epps & Jackson, 2000; McCashen, 2005).

Effective services and programs are sensitive and responsive to family cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity (Barrera et al, 2003; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Lynch & Hanson, 2004). The values and preferences of families are respected in both the design and delivery of intervention and support services. Among other things, this requires professionals to develop cultural 'competence' or sensitivity. Lynch and Hanson (2004) define cross-cultural competence as 'the ability to think, feel, and act in ways that acknowledge, respect, and build upon ethnic, sociocultural, and linguistic diversity'. Such cultural awareness needs to go beyond the mere acknowledgment of what is often no more than stereotypical characteristics, and must also include an awareness of relevant legislation.

Effective services recognise that relationships are just as important for achieving success as program structure and curriculum (Moore, 2006; Pawl & Milburn, 2006). Relationship-based intervention involves an awareness of how the relationship between professional and parent influences the family-child relationship, and how the professional's own feelings and responses influence their relationships with families (Gilkerson & Ritzler, 2005; Heffron, 2000). Important as specialist knowledge and skills are, there is a growing recognition of the equal importance of relationship skills in working effectively with families (as well as with other professionals) (Davis et al, 2002; Moore, 2006; Pawl & St. John, 1998). The ability of professionals to

build partnerships and therapeutic alliances with parents depends upon the use of particular relationship-building and help-giving practices (Berlin et al, 1998; Di Blasi et al, 2001; Dunst & Trivette, 1996).

Effective programs are staffed by people who are trained and supported to provide high quality, responsive services (Homel, 2005; Schorr, 1997; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Staff need both technical training and training in establishing effective working relationships with parents (Dunst & Trivette, 1996). A recent national Australian training survey (CCCH, 2003) identified the following training needs as common to all professionals working with young children and their families: training in communication and counselling skills, family-centred practice, cross-cultural competence, interdisciplinary teamwork, inter-agency collaboration, inclusive practices and use of natural learning environments.

While working in partnership with the parents, it is also important to see families in the context of the community and the wider society, and seek to strengthen community links and utilise community resources to meet their needs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Petr, 2004; Schorr, 1997). Family functioning is dependent upon the immediate community and wider social environments, and services need to take these wider factors into account (Crnic & Stormshak, 1997; Cooper et al, 1999; Guralnick, 2005). When child and family needs are met solely or primarily through professional sources of help, families are more likely to become dependent upon professional services (Dunst, 1997; Trivette et al, 1997).

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Structural features - what services are delivered

Effective services adopt an ecological approach that address the multiple influences on child and family functioning (Bond & Carmola Hauf, 2004; Dishion & Stormshak, 2006; Schorr, 1997). Since most outcomes for children – including health, well-being and competence - have common underlying determinants (Durlak, 1997; 1998), sustained change in children and families is only possible if all the underlying risk factors are addressed. For optimal effectiveness therefore, interventions must occur at multiple

levels simultaneously – no single intervention strategy can produce sustained change on its own.

There is a need for a comprehensive integrated service system that is able to address all the factors known to put children and families at risk (Dishion & Stormshak, 2006; Halfon et al, 2004; Sandler, 2001). Many families using early childhood services have complex needs that cannot be addressed by those services on their own. Factors that are not usually able to be addressed include housing, transport, finances, employment, parental mental health (including depression and drug abuse), marital problems (including domestic violence), and citizenship issues (in the case of refugee families). To address all of these factors, early childhood programs need to become part of a comprehensive integrated set of services that is able to address the holistic needs of families (CCCH, Policy Brief 4, 2006b). Governments also need to adopt a whole-of-government approach (Hertzman, 2002) and large non-government agencies need to ensure that their various services to families are fully integrated.

“There needs to be a focus on the outcomes rather than programs and interventions.”

Effective services have clearly defined purposes and goals that are broadly agreed upon by all stakeholders (Bond & Carmola Hauf, 2004; Galinsky, 2006; Halpern, 2000). Families and professionals involved with young children need to agree upon and be realistic about what outcomes they are seeking for the child and family. It is not uncommon for parents and professionals to have different outcomes in mind, or for those involved to be confused about whether they are seeking to make changes in the child, the family or the community. If professionals are not clear about the outcomes being sought, then they are less likely to use strategies that are effective in achieving them. There needs to be a focus on the outcomes rather than programs and interventions (Bailey et al, 2006; Dunst & Bruder, 2002; Harbin et al, 2005). Many human service professionals tend to view the services they provide as important in their own right, rather than as means to an end (such as achieving positive changes in child and family). Increasingly, there is recognition of the importance of basing services on agreed outcomes – of starting with the end in mind (Friedman, 2005)

- and of selecting the form of service delivery best able to achieve these outcomes.

Effective services have clear theoretical frameworks that show how the services that are delivered achieve the desired outcomes (Halpern, 2000; Homel, 2005; Moran et al, 2004). As Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) have argued, ‘All successful interventions are guided by a theoretical model that specifies the relation between their stated goals and the strategies employed to achieve them.’ (p. 340). In addition to being based on clear theoretical framework, effective programs use evidence-based practices wherever possible (Hemmeter et al, 2001; Kazdin & Weisz, 1998; McCluskey & Cusick, 2002).

To be effective, services should be regularly evaluated and monitored, to maintain quality and to guide improvement (Beresford & Hoban, 2005; Bond & Carmola Hauf, 2004). If the outcomes of services are not evaluated, we are unable to judge the efficacy of the service provided, and are likely to persist with approaches and goals that are not achieving the intended outcomes. When outcomes are not evaluated, the methodology selected to deliver services is often based on factors such as habit or custom (this is how we have always done it), unproven assumptions, or community expectations (assumptions regarding the nature of professional expertise and the consequent demand for ‘hands on’ therapies). Effective programs need to be structured and packaged so as to be transferable and translatable to other settings and populations (Bond & Carmola Hauf, 2004). Programs should be sufficiently well documented that another service can take the program model and procedures and apply them successfully with another population. The documentation should include the overall model or theory of change, the strategies used to achieve change, the processes used to evaluate change, and induction and training procedures.

Effective services maintain positive organisational climates - including low conflict, cooperation, role clarity, and personalisation (Glisson, 2002; Hemmelgarn et al, 2006). The organisational climates that managers and supervisors establish are a significant predictor of service outcomes and service quality (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). Findings show that organizational climate is a primary predictor of positive service outcomes (children’s improved psychosocial functioning) and a significant predictor of service quality.

What are the implications of the research?

- *How* services are delivered is as important as *what* is delivered. Developing good working relationships with service providers is the key to effective support, particularly for families with multiple problems.
- When working with families and communities, strength-based approaches enable families to build on their existing competencies and utilise local resources. Effective services also seek to ensure that families have good social support networks and that potential local sources of support are mobilised.
- Effective services and service systems have developed ways of responding promptly to the emerging needs of families and communities, and adopt flexible approaches to service delivery so as to be able to meet the evolving needs of diverse families.
- Effective services have clearly articulated theories of change and use interventions that are evidence-based. They also document these processes so that they can be readily used in other settings.
- Strong interagency service networks enable services to address the multiple needs of families in an integrated fashion.
- Staff training and ongoing support are essential for effective intervention. This includes training in understanding and meeting the needs of families from diverse cultures as well as from different socioeconomic backgrounds. It also includes training in partnership-building skills and family centre practice, to ensure that professionals know how to individualise programs and interventions to meet the specific needs and priorities of families.
- Better outcomes are achieved when services build positive organisational climates that ensure better working relationships between staff and encourage reflective practice and ongoing learning.

Considerations for policy and programs

- Support services to adopt organisational procedures and service interventions that embody all the key interpersonal and structural features of effective service delivery.
- Support service systems in developing better integrated service systems that are able to address the holistic needs of families in a seamless fashion.
- Adopt a whole-of-government approach which brings together portfolios such as housing, transport, finance, employment, mental health, citizenship, and families and community.
- Provide systemic training for services and service providers in the skills needed to implement effective practices, especially how to engage families and develop effective partnerships with them. Service providers need to be given the time and support to build and consolidate these skills.
- Shift services to an outcomes-based approach to service design and delivery. Among other things, this will involve service providers and service users reaching agreement about the outcomes they wish to achieve.
- Support services in developing skills for evaluating and monitoring service quality and outcomes to ensure the ongoing review and revision of service programs, practices and interventions.
- Require service agencies to document and report evaluation findings to enable transferability of information with other services, settings and populations – in effect, further supporting an integrated service system approach.

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An **advisory group of national and international experts** in children's policy and service delivery provides advice and peer review.

References

A full list of references and further reading used in the development of this Policy Brief is available from:

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