

EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION AUSTRALIA (VICTORIAN CHAPTER)
Annual Conference
Melbourne, 18th August 2006

Concurrent Paper

**Family Networks:
When parents get together magic happens!**

**Sue Bray
Ann Slater**
Yooralla Early Childhood Services

In 2001 Yooralla Early Childhood Services commenced our *Family Networks* pilot project running groups for families attending our service in Narre Warren. Since then *Family Networks* has evolved into a variety of different peer-support groups for various members and for families from a diverse range of backgrounds.

Family Networks aims:

- to build the capacity of all family members to develop their own coping-strategies, access community resources and develop their own support networks.
- to listen and learn from families that attend our services in order to foster innovative local community approaches to delivering family support and Early Childhood Intervention.
- to support ECI professionals and teams to change the focus of their service provision from the child to the family through developing equal working-relationships with parents and by helping family members identify, use and develop their own strengths and resources.

Family Networks is built on community development practice, peer-support models, strength-based practise and adult education theory. Care and support from professionals can only do so much; the family must do the real work in order to establish a long-term platform for enhanced family functioning.

Family Networks activities (so far) have included parent support groups and workshops (including dad's groups), Siblings groups, Grandparent groups via the telephone, groups for specific culture and language groups, parent-leader training and training of professionals as facilitators across Victoria. Every group provides a new opportunity to learn from families and to develop new ECI service models.

The following outcomes have been reported:

- Families of children with a disability feel less isolated.
- Families feel more informed about early childhood intervention and community resources.
- Professionals feel more comfortable helping parent's identify their child's and family's strengths and goals.
- Parents feel more in control of their situations and more assertive with professionals.

- Professionals report feeling they now have more of an equal partnership with parents, having a greater understanding of the parents as experts on their child and not feeling like they have to have all the answers.
- Parents learn more when information came from other parents.
- Families and staff involved in our preschools and Early Childhood Intervention services have created their own caring community through getting to know each other better and supporting each other when needed.

1. What Is Family Networks?

International and local evidence strongly indicates that the platform for long term family functioning is developed early in the parenting years. However, Early Childhood Intervention has developed as a system that is primarily focused on working with the child and their disability. To support families we need a system that compliments current child centred practice with successful strategies to empower parents. It is vital that parents grow to understand the service system and feel more in control in meeting the challenges and decisions which affect the quality of their life. **Family Networks** is an example of a structured approach to address this need.

2. Program Aims

Family Networks is a partnership approach developed by parents and professionals in the Early Childhood Intervention area. The aims of the program are to:

- enhance families knowledge of and access to community resources
- build on parents confidence, strengths and ability to take control of their lives
- resource and support parents who have children with disabilities.

These above aims are to be achieved by:

- parents feeling less isolated in their communities by recognising that there are other families sharing similar difficulties and concerns in supporting their child with a disability.
- providing practical information that is delivered in a way that families can use.
- the family's ability to access services is enhanced parents leave the program feeling more in control of their situations.

3. Program Principles

The basic principles of the program are:

Empowerment - Professionals do not take a 'power' role, play a rescuing role or give "the answers". The *Family Networks* program provides opportunities that enhance personal confidence, knowledge and skills and build community resources.

Belief - The *Family Network* program begins with belief in the individual's inherent ability to solve their problems, achieve their goals and gain power and control over their own lives.

Attitude - It is vital that professionals working with families acknowledge the difficulties experienced by families and the challenges that lay ahead. It is important that professionals foster a positive attitude based on a philosophy of empowerment, rather than compliance. Families need to feel that, given the appropriate supports and resources they are capable of dealing with many of the challenges experienced by them in parenting a child with additional needs.

Choices - Participation in the *Family Networks* program is a choice made by parents. Parents also choose the direction of the program, that is, the topics and issues to be discussed and development of the program. Only in this way can it truly be owned and driven by the families.

Recognition - The *Family Networks* program recognises how difficult it can be, to be a parent of a child with disability, and that recognition and support of a family's need for information and resources assists the growth of confidence.

Self Help - The *Family Networks* program acknowledges that care and support can only do so much; the real work must be done by the family.

4. Program Delivery

Family Networks activities can be delivered face to face and by telephone including the use of telephone conferencing. *Family Networks* activities include:

1. Parent Workshops
2. Facilitated Self Help
3. Volunteer Parent Leader Training
4. Development of Resources, Networks and Community Supports

A variety of group types and methods have emerged from the ideas and expressed wishes of different groups of parents.

5. Program Outcomes

Family Networks groups are now offered by each of the Eight Yooralla Early Childhood Intervention Services in metropolitan Melbourne.

Due to the flexible nature of *Family Networks* Groups, each and every group is different and we learn something new from each group of parents. We have Parent Leaders at a number of our services that assist our ECI staff to run groups and support other parents. All professional staff are trained as *Family Networks* Facilitators as part of their induction and professional development. Many external agencies, including generic children's services have requested Family Networks Facilitator and Parent Leader training for their staff.

References

Davies, S., Macklin, M. and Wilson, S. (1999). *Facing the Challenge. Families living with disability*. Kurrajong Early Intervention Service, Wagga Wagga, New South Wales.

Mullender, A. and Ward, D. (1991). *Self-Directed Groupwork*. Whiting and Birch, London.

Sanders, M.R. (1995). Families and mental health. In M.R. Sanders (Ed.) *Healthy families: Healthy nation* (pages 9-33). Brisbane: Australian Academic Press.

Sue Bray and Ann Slater
Yooralla Early Childhood Services
Sue.Bray@yooralla.com.au
Ann.Slater@yooralla.com.au