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**What are the Challenges and the Choices for Early Childhood
Intervention Services in implementing change?**

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Early Childhood Intervention services face the challenge of improving service delivery in a manner that will better meet the needs of children and families. Broad Insight Group, an early childhood intervention agency based in Melbourne, undertook this challenge and made significant changes to their model of service delivery during 2000 and 2001. Part of this re-development was an extensive review of current research and evidence as well as an evaluation of its service from the viewpoint of all stakeholders. While there were many aspects to this re-development, overall the result was a service model which shifted from a less flexible model of centre based groups to one which is driven fundamentally by the needs of the children and their families.

This paper introduces participants to the process of change undertaken by Broad Insight Group, and the Challenges and Choices Handbook that has been designed to assist other organisations undergo such change. Key aspects of change within early childhood intervention services are explored and the role of 'critical reflective practice' during change is highlighted. An overview of the key shifts required from a model of service delivery in order to achieve better outcomes is offered. The integral role that partnership plays in all aspects of practice is explored and the common barriers to successful partnership touched upon. Finally a framework by which Early Childhood Intervention services can commence a successful change program is outlined and Broad Insight Groups' own key learnings are shared with participants.

Key words: early childhood intervention, service delivery, change, critical reflective practice, organisation.

Introduction

A vision for the provision of more effective early childhood intervention (ECI) services is firmly taking shape. Research emanating from around the world is helping to shape and deliver this vision. Contributions closer to home (ECIA 2005; DHS 2003; PCAC 2004; ECIA 2003) are also creating clear directions for ECI services. These new directions are forcing Victorian ECI services to question their practice. A commonly asked question is: what changes need to occur to our practices to reflect this new vision for early childhood intervention services?

ECI agencies that consider changing their service from a traditional model of service delivery to one that attempts to be flexible and responsive to children, families and communities are faced with a range of challenges and choices. This paper will discuss a supportive framework for working through some of these challenges and choices. It outlines important aspects of a change process and provides specific learnings that are most relevant to early childhood intervention services.

Discussion

Why Change?

- Changing circumstances of families demand a different way of working
- New research and evidence suggest the need for a changed approach
- A compelling vision of reform of early childhood intervention services in Victoria.

Understanding change

Nothing endures but change

Heraclitus 600 BC

Change is an inevitable aspect of life, to which people adapt in a variety of ways. Viewed positively, it brings opportunities for development and growth to build on accumulated knowledge and skills. However, it can also bring feelings of uncertainty and can lead to a strong sense of discomfort and resistance, as familiar boundaries are shifted. The possible impacts of change, both positive and negative, need acknowledgement and the process of change deserves careful planning.

What are the key strategies that support change?

A number of strategies exist that support successful change, many of which could simply be described as 'good practice'. These strategies may need to intensify during a period of change. Deliberate consideration of such strategies as communication, participation, leadership and teamwork is essential prior to implementing change within the workplace. Group exploration of these strategies can lead to the identification of a unique structure required within each organisation in order to bring about successful and supported change.

Embedded into the handbook are a number of tools that assist individuals to change. A key tool emphasised is that of 'critical reflective practice'. Thomson (2000) suggests that...

In order to maintain and enhance standards of professional practice, it is essential that practitioners reflect on their practice, that is, engage in a critical and reflective dialogue with the situations in which they operate. Reflective practice avoids the pitfalls of a routine, uncritical practice which can do more harm than good.

Thompson 2000, p.142

Broad Insight Group found that critical reflective practice is essential to the process of establishing and maintaining quality services in the ECI sector. It continually assists to guide interactions with children, families, colleagues, and those professionals from different service sectors. Importantly, it guides the further development of the organisation and the services provided, in order to achieve meaningful outcomes for young children and their families.

What are the key shifts required to change early childhood intervention services?

Broad Insight Group has identified four key shifts that provide challenges to one's thinking and lead to change in the way services can be delivered to achieve better outcomes for all. These are outlined below.

1. What drives early childhood intervention services?

There are two clear truths of the needs of all families – one is that each family's needs are different, and the other is that a family's needs will change over time.

It could be said that in the past, the needs or limitations of services have determined the way that services are delivered to families. This may have been demonstrated by a centre-based service providing a similar service to all families over the course of a year.

A key shift in seeking better outcomes can be achieved by delivering services that are fundamentally driven by the needs, strengths and dreams of a family (McWilliam 2004a; Sloper 1999; Bruder 2002). It is the needs, strengths and dreams of a family that must be at the heart of decision making regarding the nature of services being delivered. Every family is different and every service provided to a family should be different. Services need to be individualised to a family's needs and they must change over time.

2. Who should services be focussed on?

Robin McWilliam suggests that the focus of intervention should be on the family and key adults in the life of a child, so as to improve a family's confidence and competence and to embed interventions into everyday routines, to maximize the child's learning opportunities.

This second shift challenges the traditional role of ECI services in delivering interventions primarily to the child. A shift in the focus of services from the child to the key adults in the life of the child must occur before services are truly effective in the long term (McWilliam 2004b; Guralnick 1997). Research involving the nature of how children learn (Odom and Wolery 2003), indicates the importance of the child's most significant adults within the child's most natural environments.

3. Where should services primarily be delivered?

Children learn by active adaptation to, learning about, mastering, controlling and understanding their worlds. As such, their experiences and interactions with their social and physical environments are opportunities for learning.

Odom and Wolery 2003

The shift from services delivered within centre based settings to services delivered within the natural environments in which the child and family interact has been pivotal to the development of better services for families. Provision of services in the most natural environments is considered to be a more effective and a more family centred approach. (Hanft and Pilkington 2000; Sheldon and Rush 2001). The evidence supporting the use of natural environments is mounting and ECI services which provide traditional centre based teaching and therapy interventions can no longer ignore this.

4. *Partnership as the foundation of better services*

The competence of professionals in working with parents is as important as expertise in their own professional areas in determining the effectiveness of their work with children with disabilities.

Hornby 1994

Broad Insight Group believes that relationships underpin practice in ECI and that successful relationships built on 'partnership' are the most effective. Consolidating and building organisational structures that support this belief has been an important aspect of on-going changes.

Deepened and shared understandings about relationships have been crucial to both individual staff practice and the organisation's practice at Broad Insight Group. Exploring the importance of relationships, what individuals bring to these, and the nature of teamwork has further consolidated these practices. An appreciation of strengthening partnerships across the organisation and with colleagues from within the local community has led to further embedding ECI into the everyday environments in which children and families spend time.

A Framework for Implementing Change

The process of change can be variable and unpredictable and it is easy to feel confused and unsure of future directions. Broad Insight Group reached a point where the processes of the organisation were 'unravelling' and challenged by these new understandings. A six step systematic approach, wherein identified elements of intervention were carefully scrutinized and re-developed to reflect new, shared understandings, was used. This structured approach is recommended to other organisations in order to move forward to implement change. An example of this approach can be demonstrated with a common element of intervention: 'Introducing a family to ECI services'. It demonstrates the challenges and choices posed through a process of reflection.

What do we currently do? What do we want to do? Why do we do it? Why do we need to do it? How could we do this better? Who does it? Who should/could do it? Where does it happen? Where should it happen? When does it occur? When should it occur? What time should be allocated to the process?

After deciding on changes delivered through a six step approach, a final check of the new 'intake' practice can be made by asking: Does this new 'intake' process build partnerships? Does this new 'intake' process demonstrate our shared understandings of the three key shifts to ECI? For Broad Insight Group, the answers to these questions assured us that our intake practice had been successfully re-shaped to accommodate these new understandings.

What were Broad Insight Group's key learnings from the process of change?

- A planned approach is successful in helping to understand and meet the challenges of the dynamic nature of change. A leadership team can be supported in planning and implementing a change process.
- A flexible approach in addressing issues and events during change means that a different or new direction can be taken. This allows time and opportunity to work within a non-threatening process that has the ability to adapt as it progresses.
- Time needs to be set aside specifically for the change process. Staff need to negotiate what can be put on hold to meet this need.

- Evaluation is an essential part of the ongoing cyclical process of change. Regular evaluation promotes the desired change, enables modification, reports on progress, maintains motivation and acts to validate the change process.
- Communication is a powerful tool in building support for the change program. Change provides an opportunity to foster an on-going communication culture that promotes trust, open debate and a willingness to contribute.
- Off-site discussions, either as a staff group or individually, are very useful in allowing a perspective uncluttered by everyday workplace distractions.
- Change happens differently for each individual according to personal style, past experience and perspective. These differences can be acknowledged and accommodated, and also attributed as a potential strength to support the process of change.
- Involvement of staff in key decision making processes and in the development, implementation and evaluation of changes allows them to 'invest' in the change process.
- Responding to the need for professional development engenders a culture of learning within an organisation. Change only becomes possible when staff feel ready and able to adapt behaviours or perform significantly new tasks. Training, targeted to pursuing the goals of change and in developing skills for implementing change, is very effective.
- An initial commitment to work with staff is essential in managing change. It ensures staff ownership of the chosen changes and promotes their ability to advocate for the changes when explaining them to key stakeholders.

Summary

The experience of Broad Insight Group brings a belief that responsive, flexible service delivery built on partnerships can engender better outcomes for all. Although no one service type is able to meet the needs of all families, services can implement changes that will facilitate flexibility in responding differently to the needs of families and the communities in which they are connected over time. This paper presents people with a 'taste' of the Challenges and Choices handbook and the learnings gained by Broad Insight Group during this change. It is hoped that this paper can both encourage and assist other organizations to undergo change.

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