



Building the national movement for collaborative, family-centred policy and practice

Communiqué and outcomes of a Symposium on 'The Art and Science of Cross-Sectoral Collaboration - Meeting the Needs of Vulnerable Families and Children', October 2008

Summary

A Symposium on 'The Art and Science of Cross-Sectoral Collaboration: Meeting the Needs of Vulnerable Families and Children' (October 2008) concluded that a concerted national movement is urgently needed to stimulate and guide joined-up and integrated policy and service responses to better assist families in need.

The Symposium Communiqué calls for: the immediate commencement of a national campaign to promote system-wide change; the provision of service responses in 'joined up' or holistic ways; the collection and dissemination of case studies; and building the momentum for change through a coalition of organisations and individuals representing a wide variety of sectors.

A reference group is to be established to further develop the key messages from the Symposium, with a view to holding a major conference in early 2010 which will bring together policy makers and practitioners. Governments are also encouraged to support model family-centred, cross-sectoral, collaborative projects in selected locations.

Introduction

The Australian Centre for Child Protection (at the University of South Australia) and Families Australia convened a Symposium entitled 'The Art and Science of Cross-Sectoral Collaboration: Meeting the Needs of Vulnerable Families and Children', in Canberra on 16 and 17 October 2008.

The Symposium was opened by the Australian Government Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Hon. Jenny Macklin MP. It was attended by over 70 NGO and Government representatives. Key presentations are available at <http://www.familiesaustralia.org.au/conference/ncpc.htm>

The Symposium brought together participants from a diverse range of sectors, such as welfare and child protection, housing, substance abuse, health, research, disability, family services, young people, education, children's/young people's services and government.

Rationale

The Symposium was convened in the context of a growing awareness amongst social welfare policy makers and practitioners of the need to build bridges between

different service sectors if the interrelated needs of disadvantaged families and children are to be met.

This increased awareness was particularly apparent in consultations during 2008 for the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, which highlighted the need for policy-makers and service deliverers to create effective partnerships, especially between traditionally child-oriented and adult-oriented services for vulnerable families.

The reasons for the increases in the rates of child abuse and neglect notifications and substantiations, in particular, are complex and are partially explained by growing public awareness and the willingness of people to make reports. However, it is clear that co-occurring problems, such as family homelessness, parental mental illness, alcohol and drug dependence and family violence, are often very significant factors.

One major reason why these trends cannot easily be reversed is the lack of a coordinated and effective national system to combat child abuse and neglect. Broadly speaking, under current arrangements, State and Territory Governments have responsibility for the day-to-day handling of child abuse cases, and the Federal Government plays a role in early intervention and awareness raising programs. Federal and State efforts have not always been well coordinated, targeted and resourced, and most State child protection systems have become critically overloaded.

The result is that Australia does not, for example, have common standards on who is responsible for reporting suspected child abuse cases, and different jurisdictions collect different data. The various tiers of government and the NGO sector have not been able to agree on an action plan to ensure that everyone's efforts - from early intervention programs to on-ground crisis responses - are 'joined up' to maximise investments and work from a common shared framework.

The current Federal Government is supportive of collaborative approaches, especially in the context of the development of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children and the Social Inclusion Agenda. Moreover, there is growing interest among community sector organisations in the further development of collaborative and integrated service delivery approaches.

Symposium aims

Against that background, the main aim of the Symposium was to identify how stronger bridges between and within different service sectors can be built in order to meet the interrelated and often complex needs of disadvantaged families and children.

Key questions posed to Symposium attendees were:

- What can we learn from each other about protecting and enhancing the wellbeing of vulnerable children and families in Australia?
- How can we work together to inspire a shift in momentum, give us hope and help us to implement extraordinary activities in collaboration?
- How can we cause conversations that will ripple out in a way that promotes significant positive change for vulnerable children and families?

Communiqué

The Symposium decided on several main themes for a Communiqué to guide future actions and to inform stakeholders, as follows:

Communiqué for collaborative family-centred policy and practice

October 2008

1. A national movement must commence immediately to strengthen existing and develop new policy approaches and service responses to families which involve greater integration of efforts and 'joined up' or holistic responses.
2. There must be a broadening of universal child-focussed services so that they are family-centred, and a broadening of adult-focussed services so they are family-centred. To those ends, significant shifts in inter- and intra-agency (NGO and Government) thinking and actions must occur.
3. An overarching vision and a set of principles need to be devised to guide actions. Some key principles are: services must focus on providing for the needs of families and children in holistic ways; joint leadership is required between all sectors and levels of government; and further research is needed to illustrate how the redirection of funding and practice toward collaborative models produces good outcomes.
4. A broadly-based coalition of not-for-profit community and government sector organisations and individuals should drive the process and include a wide variety of sectors.

Issues

Following is a summary of the key issues which were raised at the Symposium:

- Governments should shift their focus from outputs to outcomes for families and explore flexible funding models that encourage and support innovation. They should invest in working with families and establish a national program for supporting children, families and communities. Funding of 'silos' or activities which stand in isolation from other related projects or programs in the same region or location should cease. The focus should be on the provision of primary services and early intervention and prevention and empowering NGOs to do more. At the same time, it is important not to inadvertently erode the focus on the needs and rights of children.
- Non-Government service delivery organisations must empower staff to be 'brave': adapt, take risks and learn from results. They should lead an organisational cultural shift and seek the active involvement of the groups they work with. Systems should allow flexibility. Training must involve the broadest cross-section and be available across silos – from university and TAFE to professional development and supervision.
- Both Government and NGOs should map their intersecting interests and establish the key points or principles to underpin collaboration. They should

together work on relationships to lift performance and focus on strengths. Research and evaluation should be systematically integrated into joint work.

- Within organisations (Government and NGO), it is important to make collaboration a core business concern. Agencies must resource and support relationship-building. There should be encouragement for generalist responses to client problems rather than a 'silo' approach. Common language should be established in relation to data sharing and training. Flexibility is needed within formal and agreed parameters, for example, formal inter-agency MoUs and agreements. In service delivery organisations, each worker needs to regard their work as the 'front' of an holistic service system. Funding, monitoring and compliance should be separated from placement support and client input in order to reduce or eliminate structural conflicts.
- Adequate time needs to be invested to build more effective partnerships. This will involve creating a shared vision and language amongst partners, creating an internal agency vision and further developing trust and understanding of the strengths each party brings. An example of action is to foster staff visiting and co-location of services.
- There should be generic and family wellbeing training and education regarding a common ethical framework for the future workforce. This needs to occur across all human services, vocations, professions, for example, speech pathology, social work and children's services. Best practice principles should be developed about working collaboratively and about the rationale for sharing client information to enhance child and family outcomes, including how private information/data is to be managed and how consent issues are to be dealt with.
- Research occupies a place of central importance. It is important to build further the evidence base for partnerships and to better define what counts as evidence. Budgets need to contain a generous up-front research component. Evaluation needs to be built into programs at the outset, and broad outcomes, rather than outputs, need to be measured for children and families.
- Local and regional child wellbeing networks and champions need to be established, particularly to encourage adult services to become more child/family aware. There should be a focus on the local level, using localised service networks and local leadership. It is desirable to showcase exemplars of good practice at the local level, with the dissemination of learnings to a wider audience.

Next steps

There was a high degree of enthusiasm expressed by participants about building a national movement on integrated and cross-sectoral approaches. The following four steps are planned to continue the momentum:

- a reference group of NGO and government representatives and individuals will be established to advance thinking on the issues;
- governments will be encouraged to fund and support model projects in selected areas which articulate the value and challenges of cross-sectoral, collaborative, family-centred approaches;
- Symposium outcomes will be detailed in articles in relevant journals; and

- a second, larger, conference for around 250 Government and NGO representatives should be convened in early 2010, subject to funding support, to further build and sustain the movement for collaborative practice and policy, with particular reference to tackling the problems faced by vulnerable and marginalised families. The conference will need to include representatives from a wide range of family-related sectors, including health, education, housing, justice and child protection.

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