



The Brighter Futures Aboriginal Families Study

Working effectively with Aboriginal families in the Brighter Futures early intervention program

The purpose of this Research to Practice Note is to provide practitioners with an overview of the key findings from the *Brighter Futures Aboriginal Families Study* (AFS), a two year study undertaken by Community Services, NSW Department of Family and Community Services.

Key findings from this study

- The AFS found that compared to a matched control group of Aboriginal families not participating in *Brighter Futures*¹, child protection reports to the Helpline were reduced and the numbers of days in out-of-home care (OOHC) were fewer.
- Most families reported initial apprehension about involvement in the *Brighter Futures* program because Community Services is also the statutory child protection agency. However, nearly all of the families were reassured by caseworkers that *Brighter Futures* was a new early intervention program designed to help keep families together.
- The strengths based approach, advocacy skills of caseworkers and the financial support provided by the *Brighter Futures* program helped engage and build trust with the families in the program.

- The quality of the relationship between families and their caseworker was a key factor in the families' perceptions of success in the program.
- Many Aboriginal families would have felt more comfortable and less judged in the program if they had an Aboriginal caseworker.
- The AFS highlights the need to further develop caseworkers' cultural competency skills so they can work more effectively with Aboriginal families.
- Approximately fifty percent of families had at least one change in their caseworker and some families experienced more than three changes. The way in which this changeover was managed affected the family's participation in, and outcomes from, the program.
- The *Brighter Futures* program was not successful at engaging Aboriginal fathers. Ninety six percent of the study's primary carers were mothers and seventy five percent of these women were sole parents. Of the twenty five percent of primary carers who had partners, only a small minority of partners were also engaging in the *Brighter Futures* program. Many caseworkers described the father as being in the shadows of the program and this created a level of uncertainty for both the caseworker and the mother.

¹ These families were found eligible for Brighter Futures but were on a waiting list because of a lack of vacancies in the program.

- Children's services were used by the vast majority of families in the study. More than half of the families reported using childcare for the first time while in the *Brighter Futures* program. Families reported being very happy with the childcare services offered and they identified a number of benefits from using these services, including benefits to their child and themselves.
- Only fifty percent of families reported that they completed a parenting program. Families reported participating in a range of parenting programs. The majority of those families reported that the parenting programs were a positive experience but some found it difficult to implement what they learned from the program.
- The AFS data also suggests that improving parenting practices for vulnerable families is complex. An example of this is that only fifteen percent of families in the program reported problems with parenting compared to Community Services assessments indicating that sixty seven percent of the families entered the program with parenting as a vulnerability.

Background and rationale

Aboriginal people are the most disadvantaged group in Australia. As a result the life chances of their children are often compromised. They are greatly over-represented in statistics related to health and welfare, including high infant mortality, poverty, school drop-out and unemployment rates, as well as contact with statutory child protection, living in OOHC, and involvement with the juvenile justice system¹.

One of the more promising ways to address social inequality broadly has been through early intervention programs directed at families with young children². However the

effectiveness of these programs with Aboriginal families is not well researched³.

The *Brighter Futures* program delivers targeted early intervention services to families with children aged under nine years with the following vulnerabilities: domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse, parental mental health issues, lack of extended family or social supports, parent(s) with an intellectual disability, child behaviour management problems and lack of parenting skills. The program offers three core services to families: quality children's services, parenting programs and structured home visiting, including case management.

The aim of the AFS was to find out what does, and what does not, work for Aboriginal children and their families in the *Brighter Futures* early intervention program.

While the *Brighter Futures* program has undergone some change since January 2012, this research concerns the period between September 2009 and September 2011, during which *Brighter Futures* was delivered by both Community Services and non-government organisation (NGO) Lead Agencies. *Brighter Futures* is now only delivered by NGO Lead Agencies however the implications for practice from the research are relevant for both government and NGO Lead Agencies delivering early intervention programs.

Methodology

The AFS interviewed eighty Aboriginal families who were either in *Brighter Futures* program, had completed the program or had left the program early at the time of their first interview. Forty seven casework staff who managed these families as part of their caseloads were also interviewed. The AFS employed a mixed method approach that included

analysis of the qualitative interviews of families and caseworkers using NVivo 9. The study also included an analysis of Community Services administrative data on risk of harm reports to examine if participation in the *Brighter Futures* program was effective in reducing the number of reports and/ or the number of days in OOHC. All Aboriginal families participating in the *Brighter Futures* program were compared to Aboriginal families who were offered a place in the program but were put on the waiting list due to lack of vacancies.

Limitations

The findings of the AFS are likely to represent families who were more successful at engaging in the *Brighter Futures* program. Further research needs to be conducted with families who refused to participate in the program or were less successful at engaging in the program.

The focus of the AFS was the perceptions of Aboriginal families, caseworkers and managers of the program. The study did not examine the quality of services provided through the program.

What are the implications for practice?

Entry into the program

The AFS study results indicate that the engagement of families entering the program is affected by the following factors:

- the family's complexity and number of vulnerabilities
- the family's awareness of their vulnerabilities
- the family's history with Community Services, especially intergenerational issues
- the family's housing arrangements

- the family's health issues.

These factors should be taken into account when caseworkers begin the engagement process with families, and the engagement period should be flexible to adapt to these needs.

The engagement process

Families in this study reported that the program's strengths based approach helped facilitate engagement. A number of families reported that having caseworkers acknowledge their strengths was empowering. The strength-based approach helped to create a positive and collaborative relationship between the caseworker and the family.

Acknowledging the strengths of families helps facilitate the engagement process.

One of the promising findings in the study was the ability of caseworkers to overcome families' initial fears about receiving an early intervention service from the same agency that is responsible for statutory child protection. Seventy five percent of families stated they initially had apprehension about entering the program.

"It is always in the back of my mind, DoCS is a scary word because the first thing you think of when you think of DoCS 'is oh they are going to take my kids⁴."

All but two families were reassured by caseworkers that *Brighter Futures* was a program designed to help keep families together

Caseworker attributes

Families identified a number of caseworker attributes that helped to build a trusting relationship with caseworkers. These included being: friendly, open, available, able to listen without

judgement, reliable, able to communicate with families effectively and being able to follow up on actions they promised. The most important quality identified by families was that they wanted the caseworker to be upfront and honest with them even if it was confronting or challenging.

What does not work, according to families, is a caseworker who is judgemental, authoritarian, too pushy, is unreliable or doesn't follow through with what they say and who does not communicate in a language that is easy to understand.

Families want caseworkers to be upfront and honest even when it is bad news.

Engaging with families who are reluctant to enter the program

The AFS findings show that while families agree to enter the *Brighter Futures* program this agreement for some is tentative. For these families engagement relies on the caseworker's ability to understand the family's reluctance to fully participate in the program; and ability to address this.

Reluctant/tentative families may be overly sensitive to their caseworker's attributes and this may lead to disengagement in the program. For example, if a caseworker turns up five minutes late without an explanation, or fails to follow up on an action in a timely manner, this can be interpreted by the family as the caseworker not wanting to engage with them. At the same time, this family may not be home when the caseworker has scheduled a home visit or they may not keep appointments with other service providers.

Some caseworkers are interpreting tentative/reluctant engagement as indicating that families do not want to participate in the program without discussing this with families. A number of these families in the program stated that they did not know why they had been exited from the program. Engaging reluctant/tentative families is a

core skill that underpins successful caseworker practice so it is essential that caseworkers learn how to engage with these families if early intervention is going to achieve its primary goal of preventing families escalating into child protection.⁵

Forrester and colleagues (2012) have identified five main factors that contribute to parental reluctance. Firstly, many families involved in child protection have experienced discrimination, oppression and racism. Secondly, there is a power imbalance between the caseworker and the family. Thirdly, families may lack confidence in their ability to change. Fourthly, are the concerns around possible harm to the child/ren in the family. Finally, it is the nature and quality of the interaction between the family and the caseworker⁶.

Research has highlighted that caseworkers need to work harder to express empathy with reluctant/tentative families⁷. Caseworkers' sensitivity to the family's powerlessness when receiving services from government agencies and other service providers, and open and honest communication, can help facilitate the engagement process for reluctant/tentative families. There is also promising evidence in the research that motivational interviewing provides an effective strategy for engaging reluctant/tentative families⁸.

Services that support program engagement

The advocacy skills of caseworkers and financial assistance provided through the *Brighter Futures* program helped to build a positive working relationship with families. The families in the AFS stated that both these forms of support early meant minor problems were able to be resolved quickly and this helped to reduce household stress. Kemp et al has also found that being able to meet a family's

immediate needs can lead to successful engagement in a program⁹.

Culturally matched clients and caseworkers

The Aboriginality of the caseworker affected the collaborative working relationship families built with their caseworker. While not all Aboriginal families wanted an Aboriginal caseworker the majority of Aboriginal families who reported to prefer an Aboriginal caseworker said they felt more comfortable with an Aboriginal caseworker, more confident with communication, and less judged.

“Because at least Aboriginal caseworkers understand me more. Like, they know where I’m coming from, the way I speak, and I don’t have to feel embarrassed when they come around and apologise for things”¹⁰ ”

These findings are consistent with a US study which found families who perceive themselves as a member of a racial minority expected to be negatively evaluated by the services that serve them. They expected to be looked down upon and discriminated against, to have their background and culture misunderstood¹¹.

In the AFS, a number of families talked about feeling self-conscious about the way they spoke, with many Aboriginal families stating that they felt judged about the way they communicated and this affected their ability to open up to a non-Aboriginal caseworker. A number of families also stated that they felt judged even when they had no evidence that the caseworker was judging them. This was simply how they felt and it prevented the development of a trusting relationship with their non-Aboriginal caseworker.

One practice solution to address this problem is to match Aboriginal families with Aboriginal caseworkers where possible and if requested. There is support for this

approach from a number of US studies which have found that the practice of matching clients from a minority group with clinicians from the same cultural background can increase the use of services¹². These studies were initially completed with medical services and have been replicated with mental health services in Australia and the US¹³.

According to Lee and Farrell (2006) these results suggest a link between racial concordance and the development of a collaborative relationship, and demonstrate the importance of families being comfortable in their ability to communicate with service providers¹⁴.

Cultural competence training

Whilst Ziguras and colleagues (2003) found that matching a caseworker’s cultural background to clients is ideal, the short supply of Aboriginal caseworkers along side the high demand for Aboriginal caseworkers suggests that the practice of cultural matching cannot be fully implemented in NSW¹⁵. These findings highlight the need for cultural competence training to provide non-Aboriginal caseworkers with the skills and knowledge to build a trusting relationship with Aboriginal families.

Interviews with caseworkers in the AFS found that most caseworkers have participated in cultural competence training, but the level of training varied within Community Services regions and the training tended to focus on past racial assimilation policies and practices which have negatively affected Aboriginal families and not on building skills to develop stronger relationships with Aboriginal families.

Although the AFS highlights the need to review and improve cultural competence training by including training on skills that will help caseworkers build engagement

with Aboriginal families, the study did find evidence that non-Aboriginal caseworkers can build collaborative relationships with Aboriginal families.

Cultural competence training needs to provide non-Aboriginal caseworkers with the skills and knowledge to build trusting relationships with Aboriginal families.

Working with fathers

The AFS found that when a father is living in the home but not actively engaged in the program, the program is less successful. Twenty five percent of families in the study had a father at home, however only a few fathers were engaged in the program. This focus on engaging the mother and not including the father in the engagement process has been recognised in the literature as a concerning practice that not only undermines early intervention work but can also undermine risk management¹⁶.

A number of the mothers in the study reported that they had to limit their involvement in the program because their partner or child's father did not approve and other mothers reported they were less open with their caseworker when their partner/child's father was present.

These findings show the importance of engaging both mothers and fathers into the program and making it more 'father friendly'. While there is little research evidence about what might help father engagement it is widely acknowledged that their needs to be a shift in organisational culture around working with fathers¹⁷. This may mean recruiting more male caseworkers, and providing further training and support for caseworkers so they can develop more skills to engage fathers in the program. The program also needs to offer appropriate services for fathers and at flexible times, including weekends, to accommodate fathers who work.

Change in caseworkers

Just under half of families in the AFS experienced at least one change in their caseworker during the program and around twenty percent experienced more than three changes in caseworker. The study found that whilst continuity in caseworker is ideal, if the case handover is well managed the interruption to the family's progress can be minimised. A well managed handover included prompt communication of the change, and the old and new caseworker both visiting the family before the changeover.

Communication was the key as some families did not find out about the change until the new caseworker turned up at their door. When this occurred families found it very difficult to continue their progress in the program and for many it felt like they were starting all over again. Families also did not like having to retell their stories over and over.

Caseworkers as agents of change

The AFS highlighted that there are crucial points during the *Brighter Futures* program where positive outcomes for families can be reinforced. These points in time include:

- engaging tentative/ reluctant families (as already discussed)
- after engagement for families who lack insight into their vulnerabilities
- exiting the program.

Taking the time to address vulnerabilities

The AFS found that some families entered the program ready for change but others needed highly skilled caseworkers to facilitate this change. The difficulty for caseworkers is when a family does not recognise the existence of their vulnerability. In order to address this

vulnerability the caseworker needs to have a conversation with the family that helps them to develop some insight into their vulnerability. This can only occur once the family and caseworker have built a trusting relationship.

Once a trusting relationship is established, the caseworker is in a position to start addressing the family's perceptions of their problems. These conversations however can be very difficult for both the family and the caseworker.

The AFS data suggests that these conversations are often not occurring or if they are occurring they have not been followed up or have been communicated in a manner the family does not understand. For a number of families this means they are exiting the *Brighter Futures* program with none of their vulnerabilities being addressed and a feeling of failure.

A few families in the AFS that did finish the program with no vulnerabilities being addressed did acknowledge the fine line caseworkers need to tread in order to keep families actively engaged in the program and at the same time having difficult conversations about complex vulnerabilities that families are often reluctant to talk about. A number of families recognized that they themselves had resisted conversations with caseworkers about addressing vulnerabilities but at the same time they felt let down when these vulnerabilities were not addressed.

A number of caseworkers stated that they needed further training to provide them with the skills to have these difficult conversations with families to ensure that families obtain the most benefits from the program. Caseworkers also reported a need for more support and supervision from their Managers to help facilitate this work.

Once families begin to acknowledge their vulnerabilities real change can occur in the family.

Preparing families to exit the program

Another key finding from the AFS is the importance of preparing families to exit the program. A number of families felt that caseworkers did not adequately prepare them for exiting. Some families said they felt that caseworkers left exit preparation too late for families to adequately prepare themselves; and others said caseworkers assumed that one or two conversations were enough preparation to exit the program.

Exit conversations can be difficult for caseworkers as families have often developed strong relationships with them and are reluctant and/or anxious to hear about these relationships ending. Families may try to avoid having the conversation because it causes them to feel anxious.

There was evidence from the AFS that some families had developed a dependency on their caseworker. These families described their caseworkers as friends or even family and expressed great anxiety about exiting the program and those who did exit reported feeling abandoned.

Exit strategies need to occur throughout the program right from the beginning to ensure positive outcomes and that families are not developing a dependency on their caseworker.

Brighter Futures services

Early childhood services

The AFS found that children's services were used by the majority of families in the study. Families reported positive results from accessing childcare for both

themselves and their children. Over fifty percent of the families in the study were using childcare for the first time.

Families reported that convenience and word of mouth recommendations were the most important factors for deciding on which centre to enrol their children.

Families reported a number of benefits to their children from attending childcare including: socialisation, school readiness, an increase in confidence, less dependence on parents and improvement in speech.

Families also talked about benefits to themselves including: having time to do housework, time out, meeting friends, and for a few it meant be able to work or study.

Many families also attended supported playgroups. These playgroups were particularly successful for families who felt socially isolated. In a number of cases the caseworker also attended the playgroup and families reported this made the transition to the playgroup a lot less stressful. Some families also saw playgroups as a good entry point for their child before starting childcare because they could see first-hand the benefits of socialising for their children. The success of the playgroups is demonstrated by ongoing attendance for some families after exiting the *Brighter Futures* program.

Parenting programs

Fifty percent of families in the AFS accessed a wide variety of parenting programs. Whilst many of these families reported positive outcomes from parenting programs a number of families said they found it difficult to put into practice what they had learned. Many families who indicated success in the parenting programs had caseworkers that actively helped them implement the program. Given the limited evidence base on parenting programs for families involved in child protection, it is very important that caseworkers support families

through the parenting programs and help them implement the strategies they have learnt from the program at home.

The AFS findings also indicate that improving parenting practices is complex as only fifteen percent of families thought they had a problem with parenting but over sixty seven percent of families were identified by Community Services as having parenting skills as a vulnerability on entry into the program.

There are a number of reasons why families may lack insight into their parenting skills and this may include the impact of their own upbringing, the neighborhood they live in as well as their intentions around raising their children.

Every family participating in the AFS reported good intentions around parenting their children but the problem for many of these families was that these intentions did not always lead to good outcomes for their children. These results indicate that caseworkers needed to have a difficult conversation with these families to help them develop some insight into their parenting issues and how a parenting program could help develop parenting strategies that could lead to better outcomes for their children. Caseworkers need to begin this process by acknowledging families good intentions but addressing the fact that good intentions do not always lead to good outcomes.

Conclusion

Perceptions from families and caseworkers in the AFS indicate that the Brighter Futures program shows promise in helping Aboriginal families engage in services that can lead to better outcomes for Aboriginal families. Overall families reported that the strength of their relationship with their caseworker directly

impacted their involvement and perceptions of success in the program. This study also highlights the need for professional development in communication with families particularly in having difficult conversations; and cultural competency that could help develop skills for non-Aboriginal caseworkers to build better relationships with Aboriginal families.

http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/docswr/assets/main/documents/brighterfutures_enagaging_aboriginal.pdf

The application of motivational interviewing techniques for engaging "resistant" families
<http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/pubs/practice/a144436/>

Further reading and resources

The AFS full report can be accessed at [> Research centre > Prevention and early intervention research.](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au)

[Using children's voices to encourage positive parenting \[sound recording\]](#) / Pam Lewis, Bill Hewlett. (2011)

[Engaging fathers \[videorecording\]](#). (2007)

[Effective engagement strategies in a statutory context \[videorecording\]](#) / Dr Chris Trotter. (2009)

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Endnotes

¹ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP) (2011). Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage: Key indicators 2011. from http://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/111610/key-indicators-2011-overview-booklet.pdf.

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⁴ Response from family in the study.

⁵ Forrester, D, Westlake, D., & Glynn, G.(2012) Parental resistance and social worker skills: towards a theory of motivational social work. Child and Family Social Work 2012, 17, 118-129.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Shemmings, D., Shemmings, Y., & Cook, A. (2012) Gaining the trust of 'highly resistant' families: insights from attachment theory and research. Child and Family Social Work 2012, 17 130-137.

⁸ Iannos, M. & Antcliff, G (2013) The application of motivational interviewing techniques for engaging “resistant” families. Australian Institute of Families Studies.

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⁹ Kemp, S., Marcenko, M., Hoagwood, K., & Vesneski, W. (2009). Engaging parents in child welfare services: bridging family needs and child welfare mandates. *Child Welfare*, 88(1), 101-126.

¹⁰ Response by family in the study.

¹¹ Williams, J. (1997). Personal reflections on permanency planning and cultural competency. *Journal of Multicultural Social Work*, 5(1/2), 9-18.

¹² Lee, S. A., & Farrell, M. (2006). Is cultural competency a backdoor to racism? *Anthropology News*, February/March. Special edition on "Rethinking Race and Human Variation".

¹³ Ziguras, S., Klimidis, S., Lewis, J., & Stuart, G. (2003). Ethnic matching of clients and clinicians and use of mental health services by ethnic minority clients. *Psychiatric Services*, 54(4), 535-541.

¹⁴ Lee et al (2006) Is cultural competency a backdoor to racism? *Anthropology News*, February/March. Special edition on "Rethinking Race and Human Variation".

¹⁵ Hiltferty, F., Mullan, K., van Gool, K., Chan, S., Eastman, C., Reeve, R., et al. (2010). The Evaluation of Brighter Futures, NSW Community Services' Early Intervention Program: Final Report: Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales.

¹⁶ Maxwell, N., Scourfield, J, Holland, S., Featherstone, B., & Lee J (2012) The Benefits and Challenges of Training Child Protection Social Worker in Father Engagement. *Child Abuse Review* Vol. 21: 299-310

¹⁷ Ibid.