



## **The *Brighter Futures* Aboriginal Families Study**

**A study to find out what's working, and what's not working,  
for Aboriginal families in the *Brighter Futures* program**

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# Executive summary

This Report presents the findings from the *Brighter Futures* Aboriginal Families Study (AFS), a two-year study funded by Community Services, NSW Department of Family and Community Services.

The aim of this study was to find out what does, and what does not work for Aboriginal children and their families in the *Brighter Futures* early intervention program. The program has undergone some change from January 2012 but this report concerns the period prior between September 2009 and September 2011, during which *Brighter Futures* was delivered by both Community Services and non-government Lead Agencies. The *Brighter Futures* program delivers targeted early intervention services to families with children aged under nine years. The program offers three core services to families: quality children's services, parenting programs and structured home visiting, including case management.

## Methodology

The AFS interviewed 80 Aboriginal families who had completed *Brighter Futures* or had left *Brighter Futures* early or were still in the program 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 quantitative analysis of Community Services administrative data, to determine whether participation in *Brighter Futures* was effective in reducing reports to the Child Protection Helpline for all Aboriginal families participating in the program compared to those families who were offered a place in the program but refused.

## Findings & Discussion

Overall families reported positive experiences in the *Brighter Futures* program, with the majority of families expressing that their needs were being met by the program.

### Outcomes

The AFS found that compared to Aboriginal families not participating in *Brighter Futures*, child protection reports to the Helpline were significantly reduced and the numbers of days in out-of-home-care (OOHC) were fewer.

### Entry Experiences

Families reported that the most positive entry into the *Brighter Futures* program was through a referral from another government agency or from non-government organisations (NGOs). More than half of the families in the AFS sample were referred to the program because a report had been made to the Helpline. The majority of these families reported that this entry into the program was confronting but, many of these families also reported they would never have engaged in an early intervention program had they not been contacted by Community Services.

Most families reported initial apprehension about Community Services involvement in *Brighter Futures* because the Agency was routinely associated with the removal of children. Most families reported that caseworkers from both Lead Agencies and Community Services were able to

reassure them that *Brighter Futures* was separate to child protection. This indicates that Aboriginal families were more concerned about how organisations are intervening rather than who is intervening.

### **Relationship with caseworker**

The relationship that families formed with their caseworkers was a key contributor to the families' perceptions of success in the program. A number of factors affected this relationship. For example, families reported that caseworkers' Aboriginality was a significant factor affecting the relationship they built with their caseworker.

Our results also suggest that families were more likely to leave the program early if their caseworker is non-Aboriginal. Of the 14 Aboriginal families who exited the program early, 11 had a non-Aboriginal caseworker. Because of the high percentage of Aboriginal families in the *Brighter Futures* program and the small percentage of Aboriginal people in the population it is unlikely that this need for Aboriginal caseworkers will be adequately addressed.

***To address this need, Aboriginal facilitators could be used to help non-Aboriginal caseworkers build stronger relationships with Aboriginal families.***

The need for more Aboriginal caseworkers also highlighted the importance of cultural competence training for non-Aboriginal caseworkers. Caseworker interviews indicate that there was no consistency across the *Brighter Futures* program in cultural competency training and that most programs focused on past injustices and not the stereotypes that currently exist in today's society.

***More research needs to be completed on cultural competency training to find out what impact the training has on relationships that non-Aboriginal caseworkers build with Aboriginal families.***

Continuity of the caseworker was also a factor that affected the caseworker/family relationship. Just under half of the families in the study experienced at least one change in their caseworker and some families experienced more than three. The way in which this changeover was managed affected families' progress in the program. If families were given prior notice and were introduced to their new caseworker before the changeover occurred, there was little or no impact on their progress in the program.

***Managers need to ensure that caseworker changeovers are better managed to ensure the impact of caseworker changeover is kept to a minimum.***

The caseworker/family relationship was particularly crucial when families enter the *Brighter Futures* program not recognising their vulnerabilities. The ability of caseworkers to help a family to recognise and understand their vulnerabilities hinged on the family's ability to trust the caseworker. Once trust was established, caseworkers were in a position to have frank conversations with families about their vulnerabilities.

***Caseworkers need more specific training on how and when to have frank conversations with families about their vulnerabilities and what families need to do to ensure success in the program.***

### **Aboriginal fathers**

The AFS found that the *Brighter Futures* program was not engaging Aboriginal men. Ninety six percent of the study's primary carers were women and 75% of these women were sole parents. Of the 25% of primary carers who had partners, only a small minority were engaging in the *Brighter Futures* program. Many caseworkers described the father as being peripheral or in the shadows of the program and this created a level of uncertainty, not just for the caseworker but also for the mother. A number of the mothers reported having to limit their involvement in the

program because their partner's lack of engagement in the program. Others also reported that their partner's disapproval hindered communication with their caseworker as they were less open when the partner was present.

***Caseworkers need more training on how to engage fathers into early intervention programs. Early intervention programs need to actively recruit male caseworkers. There also needs to be more specific services for fathers with flexible times to accommodate working fathers.***

## Children's Services

Children's services were utilised by the vast majority of families in the study. More than half of the families reported using child care for the first time while in the program. Families reported being very happy with the child care services offered and they identified a number of benefits from using these services, including benefits to their child and themselves.

## Parenting Programs

Fifty percent of families completed a parenting program while participating in *Brighter Futures*. Whilst many of these families reported positive outcomes from the parenting programs a number of families struggled to implement the program in the home. The AFS data suggests that improving parenting practices is complex, as only 15% of the primary carers in the study thought they had problems with their parenting skills. However, on entry into the program, 67% of primary carers were seen as lacking in parenting skills.

***Research is needed to understand how parenting programs can better meet the needs of Aboriginal families.***

## Services that support engagement

Families reported that receipt of financial assistance led them to be able to solve minor problems very quickly. Families also stated that the advocacy skills of their caseworkers reduced the level of stress in their household and contributed to a stronger relationship with the caseworker. These advocacy skills were particularly relevant in housing.

## Limitations

The AFS sample was more likely to include families who were more successful in engaging in the *Brighter Futures* program and indicates that further research needs to be conducted on families who spent less time on the program, refused the program, or who were less successful in engaging in the program. AFS focus was Aboriginal families and caseworkers/Managers perceptions of the program. It does not focus on the quality of the services provided to the families. More research is required to provide an evidence base of services that work for Aboriginal families in the child protection context.

A final finding in the AFS was that the way an Aboriginal family is defined may have an effect on the results. Our results suggest that Aboriginal families in which the primary carer is Aboriginal may have different needs compared to Aboriginal families where the primary carer is non-Aboriginal. This is supported by the finding that it was mainly Aboriginal carers who preferred Aboriginal caseworkers and Aboriginal services.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Aim of the study

The overall aim of the *Brighter Futures* Aboriginal Families Study (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. More specifically, the AFS aimed to examine the experience of Aboriginal families participating in *Brighter Futures*, the outcomes of the program for Aboriginal families, and the factors that influence engagement.

## 1.2 Background and rationale

Aboriginal people are the most disadvantaged group in Australia and, as a result, the life chances of their children are seriously compromised. They are over-represented in statistics related to health and social hardship, including infant mortality, poverty, school drop-out and unemployment rates, as well as contact with statutory child protection, living in out-of-home care, and involvement with the juvenile justice system (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP, 2011).

One of the more promising ways to address social inequality generally has been through early intervention programs directed at families with young children (Watson, White, Taplin, & Huntsman, 2005). However the effectiveness of these programs with Aboriginal families is less well researched (Munro, 2012). In particular it is important to understand what works within an early intervention strategy; to target resources and maximise positive outcomes for as many families as possible with the funding available. At the same time, it is also important to examine what does not work, otherwise resources will be misdirected into programs that are of little value for children, their families and the community.

The impetus for this study was provided by a literature review (Munro, 2012) of evaluated early intervention programs targeting Aboriginal children and their families. The review had a specific focus on the effectiveness of early childhood education, group-based parent education programs and structured home visiting programs (including general case management, brokerage and more intense one-to-one parenting programs education) in the context of child protection.

The review found only a small number (n=5) of rigorously evaluated Aboriginal-specific early intervention programs; and for those programs where an evaluation had been conducted:

- No evaluations focused on early intervention for Aboriginal families in a child protection context
- There were methodological limitations with the research, including small un-representative sample sizes, lack of comparison groups and high attrition rates.

## 1.3 The *Brighter Futures* early intervention program

In December 2002 the NSW Government introduced reforms to the child protection system to improve outcomes and decrease demand for child protection services in NSW. A key focus of these reforms was the provision of early intervention services to prevent entry and escalation of families in the statutory child protection system.

The *Brighter Futures* program delivers targeted early intervention services to families with children aged under 9 years or who are expecting a child, and where the child/ren are at high risk



of entering the statutory child protection system. *Brighter Futures* is a voluntary program, predicated on strengths-based practice principles which recognise that a parent's motivation to change and to participate in a service is greatly increased when their strengths are recognised and fostered. The program aims to increase child safety through improved parenting capacity and enhanced family well-being. While the program has undergone some changes in January 2012, this report concerns the period prior to this during which *Brighter Futures* was delivered by both Community Services and non-government Lead Agencies.

The *Brighter Futures* program targets the following vulnerabilities:

- domestic violence
- drug and alcohol misuse
- parental mental health issues
- lack of extended family or social supports
- parent(s) with significant learning difficulties or intellectual disability
- child behaviour management problems (e.g. parent-child conflict, school problems)
- lack of parenting skills or inadequate supervision.

Families can enter the program through one of three pathways:

- A report to the Child Protection Helpline that Community Services assesses as eligible for *Brighter Futures* (referred to throughout this report as Helpline pathway);
- A referral from an Aboriginal Maternal Infant Health Strategy (AMIHS) service directly to a Community Services Centre (AMIHS pathway);
- A referral to a *Brighter Futures* Lead Agency by a community agency or individual (Community pathway).

Priority of access is given to families referred through the AMIHS pathway; to families with children under 3 years of age; pregnant young people; or young parents transitioning from OOHC.

*Brighter Futures* program offers an integrated service designed to enhance child safety, parenting capacity and family functioning. The model includes case management and at least two of the following core service options:

- Quality children's services
- Parenting programs (group based)
- Structured home visiting programs (including parenting programs delivered one-to-one).

## 1.4 Outcomes for Aboriginal families from the *Brighter Futures* evaluation

The Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of NSW conducted a four-year evaluation of the *Brighter Futures* early intervention program (Hilferty, et al., 2010). The *Brighter Futures* Evaluation Report and subsequent detailed analysis of data, which looked at families who entered the program between January 2002 and June 2009, indicates that families entering *Brighter Futures* through the Helpline pathway displayed a significant reduction in the number of re-reports after participation in the program. The average rate of re-reports for children entering *Brighter Futures* via the Helpline pathway was reduced by approximately 1.2 reports per year per family. There was no reduction in child protection re-reports for children entering *Brighter Futures* through the community referral pathway. Also, after participating in *Brighter Futures*, the total time

children spent in OOHC was reduced by approximately 25%. In contrast, the total time spent in OOHC for children in the comparison group increased by approximately 35%. Families who remained in the program for longer periods of time also had better outcomes.

The evaluation found that Aboriginal families were well represented in the program with 517 (21%) of all families identifying as Aboriginal. Compared with non-Aboriginal families, parents in these families were less educated, younger, had larger numbers of younger children, were more likely to be unemployed and welfare dependent, and earned less. Aboriginal families were also much more likely to enter the program with background issues of alcohol and drugs and domestic violence but less likely than non-Aboriginal families to indicate mental health problems. Also, 23% of all children who entered the program by being reported to the Helpline as being at risk of harm were Aboriginal. The most common reason for the Helpline report was neglect, but there were also reports for abuse, carer issues and domestic violence.

Despite the significant number of Aboriginal families entering the program they were also more likely to spend less days in the program, withdrawing early rather than achieving their case plan goals. Compared to non-Aboriginal families they tended to be managed by a funded lead agency rather than Community Services and were more likely to have a child placed in OOHC.

The evaluation also found that there was a consistent shortage of Aboriginal workers across the *Brighter Futures* program, given the high proportion of Aboriginal families engaged in the program. While the evaluation included Aboriginal families in the *Brighter Futures* program it did not specifically target them or examine outcomes from the program for Aboriginal families.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology for this study has been developed collaboratively through a series of consultations with program stakeholders<sup>1</sup> to inform the research design. A Report Steering Group<sup>2</sup> was also established to provide advice and feedback on the report. The Ethics Committee of the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW granted ethics approval for this study.

### 2.1 Research objectives

The AFS aims to find out what does, and what does not work for Aboriginal children and their families in the *Brighter Futures* early intervention program. The study aims to find out how best to support Aboriginal families to engage in and achieve positive outcomes within the context of an early intervention program.

The research objectives are:

1. To determine the outcomes for Aboriginal families and children as a result of their participation in *Brighter Futures*:
  - Does the program reduce the number of reports received at the Helpline?
  - What are the impacts of the program on OOHC placements?
2. To gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of Aboriginal families in *Brighter Futures*:
  - Do program entry pathways work well for families? What factors most encourage or hinder entry?
  - How does the caseworker/family relationship affect families engaging in the program?
  - How well is the program engaging fathers?
  - Which, if any, of the program services were provided by Aboriginal staff or agencies and how did this affect families' experiences of the program?
  - What services support engagement for Aboriginal families?
  - What factors led to families leaving the program?

### 2.2 Research design

The AFS employed a mixed method approach that included:

- Community Service administrative data, including risk of harm reports and OOHC placements
- Interviews with Aboriginal families<sup>3</sup>
- Interviews with caseworkers<sup>4</sup> and managers' casework<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix B

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix C

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix D

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix E

## 2.3 Community Services administrative data

The administrative data contained information on all families who participated in the *Brighter Futures* program between 1st July 2007 and 30th March 2011<sup>6</sup>. This data included information about: who managed the family (Community Services/Lead Agency); Aboriginality; region; vulnerabilities; and time in the program. The report's data contained details of all risk of harm reports made on children whose families were participating in the program two years prior to entering the program and one year after exit. The OOHC placement data contained information on *Brighter Futures* families and a comparison group on OOHC episodes.

A comparison sample was also drawn from Aboriginal families who were considered eligible for the program and were motivated to participate but for whom there were no vacancies in the *Brighter Futures* program at the time. These families were placed on a waiting list but never received services.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.4 Interviews with Aboriginal families

The eligibility criteria for participation in the AFS were Aboriginal families who were currently participating in the *Brighter Futures* program, had completed the program, or had left the program before completion across selected sites within the seven regions. Where possible families who were currently participating in the *Brighter Futures* program at the first interview, were also interviewed a second time at least six months later.

Families were recruited via two different methods. Firstly, caseworkers were contacted to recruit families and secondly, administrative data with information on Aboriginal families in the program was used to contact families to invite them to participate in the program.

Family interviews were conducted by a combination of external interviewers and internal research staff employed in the Community Services Research Centre. All families received a \$50 gift card payment for each interview in recognition of their time and contribution to the study.

The study used the Helping Relationship Inventory (HRI) developed by Poulin and Young (1997) to measure the family relationship<sup>8</sup> with the caseworker. The HRI combines two different components: a structural component; and an interpersonal component.

## 2.5 Interviews with caseworkers and casework managers

Caseworkers and Managers Casework were also recruited into the AFS to participate in interviews about what works and what does not work for Aboriginal families, and also to provide a better understanding of the caseworker and family relationship. Forty seven Caseworkers/Managers Casework in seven sites across NSW from both Lead Agencies and Community Services agreed to participate in the interview. All interviews were conducted via the telephone generally within one month of the interview being conducted with the family. The HRI was also used with caseworkers<sup>9</sup> to measure their relationship with families.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that this cannot be compared directly with the SPRC data which reflects the period 2002-2009

<sup>7</sup> There were a number of other possibilities for selecting a comparison sample (e.g. refused, withdrew at a later date, moved out of NSW, did not meet eligibility criteria) but this was the best matched group as they comprised the families who were both eligible and willing to participate. Families who refused had fewer reports prior to assessment and may have thought they did not need 'intervention'. Statistically they also had less capacity to change.

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix F

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix G

## 2.6 Participant profiles

### Aboriginal families

As shown in Table 1, 80 families participated in the AFS (37 families were interviewed twice) across the seven regions with both Community Services and Lead Agency management. Of the 104 families referred, 80 were interviewed. Fifty two families were recruited by caseworkers and 28 families were recruited by contacting families directly using the administrative data. There were similar numbers of interviews completed for Lead Agencies (n = 60) and Community Services (n = 57).

**Table 1: Number of Aboriginal families participating in AFS by Region, Lead/Agency Community Services, and program status at interview**

| Region                      | Lead Agencies<br>Program Status @ Interview |          |            |       | Community Services<br>Program Status @ Interview |          |            |       | Total Interviews |          |            |           |
|-----------------------------|---|----------|------------|-------|--|----------|------------|-------|------------------|----------|------------|-----------|
|                             | In program                                  | Complete | Left early | Total | In program                                       | Complete | Left early | Total | In program       | Complete | Left early | Total     |
| <b>Hunter/Central Coast</b> |   |          |            |       |  |          |            |       |                  |          |            |           |
| - 1 <sup>st</sup> interview | 1   | 0        | 2          | 3     | 7  | 0        | 0          | 7     | 8                | 0        | 2          | <b>10</b> |
| - 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview | 0   | 0        | 1          | 1     | 4  | 2        | 0          | 6     | 4                | 2        | 1          | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>Met Central</b>          |   |          |            |       |  |          |            |       |                  |          |            |           |
| - 1 <sup>st</sup> interview | 0   | 0        | 1          | 1     | 5  | 0        | 1          | 6     | 5                | 0        | 2          | <b>7</b>  |
| - 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview | 0   | 0        | 0          | 0     | 4  | 0        | 0          | 4     | 4                | 0        | 0          | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Met South West</b>       |   |          |            |       |  |          |            |       |                  |          |            |           |
| - 1 <sup>st</sup> interview | 6   | 1        | 1          | 8     | 0  | 0        | 1          | 1     | 6                | 1        | 2          | <b>9</b>  |
| - 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview | 0   | 0        | 0          | 0     | 0  | 0        | 0          | 0     | 0                | 0        | 0          | <b>0</b>  |
| <b>Met West</b>             |   |          |            |       |  |          |            |       |                  |          |            |           |
| - 1 <sup>st</sup> interview | 6   | 1        | 1          | 8     | 0  | 1        | 0          | 1     | 6                | 2        | 1          | <b>9</b>  |
| - 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview | 4   | 0        | 0          | 4     | 0  | 0        | 0          | 0     | 4                | 0        | 0          | <b>4</b>  |

**Table 1 Continued.**

| Region                      | Lead Agencies<br>Program Status @ Interview |          |            |           | Community Services<br>Program Status @ Interview |          |            |           | Total Interviews |           |            |            |
|-----------------------------|---|----------|------------|-----------|--|----------|------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|------------|------------|
|                             | In program                                  | Complete | Left early | Total     | In program                                       | Complete | Left early | Total     | In program       | Complete  | Left early | Total      |
| <b>Northern</b>             |   |          |            |           |  |          |            |           |                  |           |            |            |
| - 1 <sup>st</sup> interview | 6   | 0        | 0          | 6         | 2  | 2        | 0          | 4         | 8                | 2         | 0          | <b>10</b>  |
| - 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview | 0   | 0        | 0          | 0         | 0  | 0        | 0          | 0         | 0                | 0         | 0          | <b>0</b>   |
| <b>Southern</b>             |   |          |            |           |  |          |            |           |                  |           |            |            |
| - 1 <sup>st</sup> interview | 9   | 0        | 1          | 10        | 10   | 1        | 3          | 14        | 19               | 1         | 4          | <b>24</b>  |
| - 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview | 3   | 4        | 2          | 9         | 5  | 2        | 1          | 8         | 8                | 6         | 3          | <b>17</b>  |
| <b>Western</b>              |   |          |            |           |  |          |            |           |                  |           |            |            |
| - 1 <sup>st</sup> interview | 5   | 2        | 0          | 7         | 3  | 1        | 0          | 4         | 8                | 3         | 0          | <b>11</b>  |
| - 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview | 0   | 1        | 2          | 3         | 2  | 0        | 0          | 2         | 2                | 1         | 2          | <b>5</b>   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                | <b>40</b>                                   | <b>9</b> | <b>11</b>  | <b>60</b> | <b>42</b>  | <b>9</b> | <b>6</b>   | <b>57</b> | <b>82</b>        | <b>18</b> | <b>17</b>  | <b>117</b> |

**Total 1<sup>st</sup> interviews = 80**

**Total 2<sup>nd</sup> interviews = 37**

Table 2 indicates that the AFS families had similar characteristics to the Aboriginal families in the *Brighter Futures* Evaluation except for Aboriginality of the primary carer: AFS (n = 69%) compared to BF evaluation (n = 40%). The AFS study participants were also more likely to be from single parent households.

**Table 2. Comparison of family characteristics between families in the AFS and the *Brighter Futures* evaluation**

| Family Characteristics             | Aboriginal Families Study (AFS)<br>(n=80) |                  | Aboriginal Families in<br><i>Brighter Futures</i> Evaluation*<br>(n=517) |                  |
|------------------------------------|---|------------------|--|------------------|
|                                    | N   | %                | n  | %                |
| Primary carer Aboriginal           | 55  | 69               | 207  | 40               |
| Primary carer female               | 76  | 95               | 491  | 95               |
| Single parent household            | 60  | 75               | 315  | 61               |
| Primary carers average age (years) | 29.3                                      | Min 18<br>Max 46 | 26.8   | Min 15<br>Max 57 |
| Carers under 25 years              | 30  | 38               | 250  | 48               |
| Ave children in household          | 2.7                                       |                  | 2.6  |                  |
| Children aged 0-8 years            | 157                                       | 74               | 1090   | 82               |
| Main income                        |   |                  |  |                  |
| • government benefits              | 69  | 87               | 463  | 90               |
| • paid work                        | 7   | 9                | 38   | 7                |
| Did not complete year 12           | 48  | 60               | 356  | 69               |

\* Based on the no. Aboriginal families who completed their first *Brighter Futures* Family Survey



Table 3 compares the AFS families to the overall population of Aboriginal families in the *Brighter Futures* program between 2007 and 2011. The AFS families were more likely to be managed by Community Services and much more likely to stay in the program in comparison to Aboriginal Families in the *Brighter Futures* program overall. The AFS sample was also under-represented in Northern and Western regions and over-represented in Southern region in comparison to the overall number of Aboriginal families in the *Brighter Futures* program.

**Table 3: Comparison of service characteristics between AFS families and all Aboriginal families in Brighter Futures between 2007–2011**

| Service characteristics                                 | Aboriginal Families Study (AFS) (n=80) |    | Aboriginal families in <i>Brighter Futures</i> 2007-2011 (n = 2,084) |    |
|---|--|----|--|----|
|   | n                                      | %* | n  | %* |
| Managed by:   |  |    |  |    |
| • Community Services                                    | 37                                     | 46 | 775  | 37 |
| • Lead agency   | 43                                     | 54 | 1309   | 63 |
| Families who stayed in the program six months or longer | 74                                     | 93 | 875**  | 60 |
| Regions   |  |    |  |    |
| • Hunter/Central Coast                                  | 10                                     | 13 | 271  | 13 |
| • Metro Central   | 7                                      | 9  | 104  | 5  |
| • Metro South West                                      | 9                                      | 11 | 134  | 6  |
| • Metro West  | 9                                      | 11 | 185  | 9  |
| • Northern  | 10                                     | 13 | 576  | 28 |
| • Southern  | 24                                     | 30 | 254  | 12 |
| • Western   | 11                                     | 14 | 560  | 27 |

\* Percentages are provided rounded to the nearest whole numbers.

\*\* This number is based on a total of 1,464 as some families had only recently entered *Brighter Futures*.

Table 4 shows that, compared to Aboriginal families overall in the *Brighter Futures* program, AFS families were more likely to enter the program with child behaviour management as a vulnerability, and they were less likely to enter the program with parental mental health and drug and alcohol misuse vulnerabilities.

**Table 4: Comparison of vulnerabilities between AFS families and all Aboriginal families in *Brighter Futures* between 2007-2011**

| Vulnerabilities                  | Aboriginal Family Study (AFS) (n=80) |    | Aboriginal Families in <i>Brighter Futures</i> 2007-2011 (n=2084) |    |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----|---|----|
|                                  | n                                    | %  | n   | %  |
| Lack of parenting skills         | 54                                   | 68 | 1250  | 60 |
| Lack of social support           | 38                                   | 48 | 1210  | 58 |
| Domestic violence                | 36                                   | 45 | 1170  | 56 |
| Child behaviour management       | 35                                   | 44 | 700   | 34 |
| Parental mental health           | 28                                   | 35 | 875   | 42 |
| Drug & alcohol misuse            | 26                                   | 33 | 1025  | 49 |
| Learning/intellectual disability | 6                                    | 8  | 200   | 10 |

### Limitations of the Study

The comparison of the AFS sample to all Aboriginal families in the program indicates that there are a number of differences in relation to time in the program, representation across regions and also the vulnerabilities that families have on entry into the program. These results indicate that the AFS sample is not representative of the entire sample of Aboriginal families participating in *Brighter Futures*. This bias was likely to have come from the fact that our design specifically targeted families who had completed the program. Another potential source of bias was that 65% (n=52) of families were recruited through their caseworker. This means that the AFS sample was more likely to include families who were more successful in engaging in the *Brighter Futures* program and indicates that further research needs to be conducted on families who spent less time in the program.

### Caseworkers/Managers Casework

As shown in Table 5, the Caseworkers/Managers Casework interviewed for AFS were from all regions and there were almost equal numbers from Lead Agencies and from Community Service Centres (CSC). Also, 33% (n = 16) of the caseworkers and managers were Aboriginal, the majority of the staff were female (n = 40) and 64% of staff had a bachelor's degree or higher.

**Table 5: Caseworker/Managers Casework interviews by Region and Agency**

| Region               | Lead Agency | Community Services | Total     |
|----------------------|-------------|--------------------|-----------|
| Hunter/Central Coast | 1           | 6                  | 7         |
| Met Central          | 0           | 2                  | 2         |
| Met South West       | 4           | 1                  | 5         |
| Met West             | 3           | 1                  | 4         |
| Northern             | 2           | 2                  | 4         |
| Southern             | 9           | 10                 | 19        |
| Western              | 4           | 2                  | 6         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>         | <b>23</b>   | <b>24</b>          | <b>47</b> |

## 2.7 Data analysis

Administrative data, including risk of harm reports and OOHC placements collected from Community Services were analysed using SPSS.

Audio files of the semi-structured interviews for both families and caseworkers and Managers casework were transcribed verbatim, with transcripts uploaded into NVivo v.9 for detailed analysis.

The interview data from both Caseworkers/Managers Casework and families was coded through the process of two coding frameworks<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix H

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1 Outcomes for Aboriginal families as a result of their participation in *Brighter Futures*

#### 3.1.1 Does the program reduce the number of child protection reports generated through the Helpline?

To determine if the *Brighter Futures* program was effective in reducing reports to the Helpline a comparison sample of families who were eligible for the program and were motivated to participate but for whom there were no vacancies available was created. Out of a total of 1,552 families, with 3,729 children eligible for *Brighter Futures* during this time period (1st July 2007 to 30th March 2011) only 92 children from 33 families who were placed on a waiting list did not receive services.

When we compared families in *Brighter Futures* with the comparison sample, Helpline reports for abuse, neglect and carer issues were significantly reduced for those participating in the *Brighter Futures* program. The total number of these reports increased by an average of 1.88 reports for those who did not participate in the program; whereas the number of reports was reduced by 0.61 for those who participated in the program.

#### 3.1.2 What are the impacts of *Brighter Futures* on out-of-home care placements?

The OOHC data indicated similar results. Both the comparison group and the intervention group were again well matched with 9.1% and 10.1% of these families respectively having experienced a child being placed in OOHC prior to the intervention<sup>11</sup>.

For the comparison group, there were only four children who had entered care in the 12 months prior to being assessed for *Brighter Futures*, but 20 entered OOHC in the following 12 months, an increase of 400%. In the intervention group there were 82 children OOHC in the 12 months before the intervention and 97 after the intervention, an increase of only 18%.

For the comparison group the average number of days in OOHC per family also increased substantially from 25 days in OOHC prior to contact to 290 days in OOHC after contact, an increase of 1069%. For the intervention group the average number of days in OOHC remained relatively stable with an average of 63.9 days in OOHC per family prior to 79.8 days in OOHC per family after the intervention (days in OOHC per child goes from 26.1 to 32.6 days, an increase of 24.8%)

#### 3.1.3 In-depth understanding of the experience of Aboriginal families in *Brighter Futures*

Based on data collected from the AFS sample, the *Brighter Futures* program was positively received by the vast majority of the families in the AFS. Ninety one per cent of families (n=73) thought that their needs were met by the *Brighter Futures* program.

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<sup>11</sup> For those who declined it was on 2%, those who withdrew it was 4.5% but for families who were considered ineligible it was 13.5%.

***“Definitely with my needs getting some assistance to deal with all the stress and things that were going on and maybe just to sit down and say what do I tackle first? And we actually did, we dealt with a lot of that and looking at what each child needed. And also looking at what I needed as a stress release and so yes, we kind of ticked all the boxes, worked out what needed to be done.”***

Eighty nine per cent of families (n=71) thought that the program helped them either moderately or a lot, and 11% described the program as only helping a little or not at all. Also, 80% of families thought that they were now more able to cope with problems as they arise, 13% thought their ability to cope had remained the same, and 8% thought that their ability to cope had been diminished since starting the program.

Another indicator of program success was that most families saw the program as being one that could positively help others with 96% (n=77) of families saying that they would recommend the program to other people. The success of the program can also be illustrated by the fact that many families in the study identified that they now know there are services that can help. For many this meant a new-found confidence in being able to engage with services. This result is significant as it has been highlighted in the literature that many Aboriginal families are not accessing mainstream services (Barbour, 2000; Victorian Department of Human Services, 2004).

### **3.1.4 Do program entry pathways work well for families? What factors most encourage or hinder entry?**

This study is limited to families who entered the program so we cannot report on the factors that may have prevented entry into the program. Community Services' administrative data indicates that 48% of Aboriginal families exit within the first six months of the program. This is an important area for further research.

For the AFS, 59% (n=47) of families entered the program from being reported to the Helpline and 11% self-referred because the program was recommended to them by friends or relatives already involved in *Brighter Futures*. The remaining 30% of families were referred to the program by other government and non-government agencies (including hospitals). Families reported a more positive experience via this referral pathway.

For those entering the program after being reported to the Helpline, the first time the family learned about the *Brighter Futures* program was when a caseworker from Community Services conducted a home visit. For many families this was a confronting situation but in all except two AFS families, the caseworkers were able to explain what *Brighter Futures* offered and reassure families that the program was a voluntary early intervention program with the aim of preventing risk of harm from escalating. A number of AFS families commented that even though their initial experience was confronting they later saw it as a “blessing in disguise” because they would not have received the service and support otherwise. This indicates that while the Helpline entry pathway is confronting for families, it is successfully providing a pathway into the program for families who may not have accessed the service otherwise.

For families who self-referred because of recommendations from friends or relatives already involved in *Brighter Futures*, the biggest barrier was making the phone call to the Helpline.

The most positive entry experience was reported by families who were referred to the program through other government agencies, non-government agencies and hospitals, including community referrals from Lead Agencies. These organisations generally made the referral on behalf of the family.

Having Community Services involvement in the program did create apprehension for the majority (75%) of families interviewed in the AFS, because they are the statutory child protection agency.

***“it is always in the back of my mind, DoCS<sup>12</sup> is a scary word. Because the first thing you think of when you think of DoCS is oh they are going to take my kids.”***

***“...Like you’ve heard all the bad stories about DoCS stepping in and I know the situation isn’t great with me and the little fella. And the last thing I need is them stepping in and saying we’re ripping him out of here. Like I know logically that doesn’t actually happen but it’s in your head. Because DoCS have got the reputation for it, whether it’s earned or not they’ve got the reputation.”***

This initial apprehension was further exacerbated by the fact that over 80% of the families in the study had a prior history with Community Services, and most reported having negative experiences including some who had been placed into care as a child.

***“As a child I was actually removed by DoCS from this house and I was like oh no I don’t want to be involved with DoCS because I’d been through it.”***

These findings are consistent with the literature, which reports a high level of government intervention in the lives of Aboriginal families in comparison to non-Aboriginal families (Stanley, Tomison & Pocock, 2003; Tilbury, 2009).

Families reported that they were able to overcome the initial apprehension about Community Services involvement the longer they stayed in the program, regardless of whether the services were delivered by a Lead Agency (54%) or Community Services (46%). Most families reported that caseworkers were able to reassure them that the *Brighter Futures* program was a voluntary early intervention program. This indicates that families are more concerned about how organisations are intervening rather than who is intervening. This finding is supported by Tilbury (2009) who has argued that it is not government intervention in Aboriginal families that is problematic, but the nature of the intervention.

This initial apprehension reported by families about Community Services involvement does raise the question of how the presence of a statutory child protection agency in early intervention service delivery influences the relationship between families and their caseworker. The literature on relationship building with families who have had past experience with child protection suggests that some families will engage in the service as a form of compliance, rather than an active form of engagement that develops into a true collaborative relationship capable of creating change (Hunter, 2009)

Eight percent of families (n=6) said they joined the *Brighter Futures* program to keep the child protection caseworkers away, indicating a compliant reason for joining, whereas all other families stated that they were entering the program because they needed support. Most families understood support as having access to a worker who would provide advice and access to services and support. This indicates that, at least at the initial entry level, the majority of families in the study said they were joining the program because of a need rather than to comply with a government department.

### **3.1.5 How does the relationship between the caseworker and family affect engagement?**

All families received home visits from a caseworker, ranging from a weekly visit to once every six weeks. Analysis of the AFS interviews showed that the success of the *Brighter Futures* program was due to the relationship families had with their caseworker. This relationship was affected by a number of factors including: whether they were able to develop a collaborative relationship with

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<sup>12</sup> This is the acronym for the former Department of Community Services.

the caseworker, the skills of the caseworker, the capacity of the family to actively engage, whether their caseworker was Aboriginal, and the number of caseworkers families had during the program.

### 3.1.6 What underpins the collaborative working relationship?

The *Brighter Futures* program works to build on strengths of families. Many families commented on the positive nature of this approach. For some families it was the first time someone had recognised their family's strengths and they found this empowering. This strengths-based approach, combined with the fact that the *Brighter Futures* program is a voluntary program offered by both Community Services and Lead Agencies, helped to create a collaborative relationship between the caseworker and the families.

### 3.1.7 How does casework influence the program?

#### Caseworker attributes

The families identified a number of caseworker attributes that are important for building collaborative working relationships. These attributes included being: friendly, open, honest, available, able to listen without judgement, reliable and being able to successfully follow up on things they promised. These attributes are consistent with the literature and are similar to the themes which emerged from Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vesneski's (2009) study on good helping relationships in child welfare. The most important quality identified by families was that they wanted the caseworker to be upfront and honest with them even if it was bad news.

What families said they do not respond well to is a caseworker who is judgmental, authoritarian, too pushy, is unreliable or doesn't follow through with what they say. These negative attributes are similar to other studies on social worker-client relationships (Maiter, Palmer, & Manji, 2006).

While the negative caseworker attributes described above led to relationship breakdowns with the family, having all the positive caseworker attributes did not necessarily mean that the relationship went on to be a truly collaborative one that fostered change in the family. In a number of cases families who had positive relations with their caseworker became frustrated because none of their vulnerabilities were being addressed. Caseworker's skills in being able to find a balance in guiding families to overcome often multiple complex vulnerabilities, and the ability of families to actively engage in the program, need to come together in order for change to occur.

#### Building a relationship that helps initiate change in families

There were a number of key stages in the program that impact on the development of the caseworker family relationship. Firstly, the initial period of engagement can be a testing period when families are uncertain about the caseworker or the program. One of the themes emerging from the study is that when families are unsure about the program they can be highly sensitive to the behaviour of their caseworker in the beginning of the engagement process. For example, if a caseworker turns up five minutes late without an explanation, or fails to follow up on an action no matter how small, this is often internalised by the families as the caseworker not caring about them. At the same time, those families may not be home when caseworkers have scheduled home visits or they make not keep appointments with other services. Some caseworkers interpret this behaviour as non-engagement without communicating this to the families so they can understand the consequences of their behaviour. Caseworkers open communication and awareness of the family's powerlessness in terms of dealing with government agencies and service providers can facilitate the early engagement process.

## Caseworkers as Agents of Change

The AFS found that there was a fine balance between keeping families in a voluntary program whilst also facilitating change in the family. Some of the families in this study entered the program ready for change but others needed highly skilled caseworkers to facilitate this change. The capacity for change in a family can be complicated by the frequency and severity of their problems, their own childhood experiences, and their level of social support.

A successful outcome from the program was often dependent on the timing of when caseworkers offered services to a family. For example, a skilled caseworker will know when a family is ready to actively participate in a program such as a parenting program with the greater likelihood of achieving positive changes. Some families in the AFS described caseworkers as 'pushy' and this led to the families having negative feelings towards the caseworker and passive participation in programs. In other cases, the families acknowledged that the 'pushy' caseworker was what they needed to get them to attend a program which resulted in positive changes. Knowing the right time to intervene is tied to a trusting relationship and good communication between the caseworker and the family.

It is difficult for caseworkers to work with families who do not recognise their vulnerabilities or are not ready to change their behaviours. Caseworkers need to be skilled in having honest and upfront conversations with the families. These types of conversations can be very difficult for both the family and the caseworker and AFS data suggests that caseworkers need more supervision from their Managers and professional training in this area. As noted above, having honest and upfront conversations is tied to a trusting relationship and non-judgmental communication between the caseworker and family.

The study found that once a caseworker was able to establish a trusting working relationship with the family they were then in a good position to start addressing the family's understanding of the problems and associated behaviours. Once families begin to acknowledge their vulnerabilities positive change could occur.

Almost half the families interviewed in the AFS described their relationship with their caseworker in terms such as 'like friends' or 'like family'. This is illustrated by the following quote from an interview with a family member:

**"I don't like calling her my Caseworker, I call her more than a friend because I can sit there and feel comfortable with her and I'm not embarrassed by anything."**

While this illustrates a trusting working relationship between the caseworker and family it also shows that the caseworkers' role as a facilitator is unclear. This could impede a family from successfully exiting the *Brighter Futures* program as independent agents of change with their own resources and knowledge to carry on without the caseworker. Caseworkers need to be careful that they do not create a dependency in the families they are working with.

## Preparing families for exiting the program

Preparing families to exit the *Brighter Futures* program is important. The AFS indicates that caseworkers are underestimating how much time families need to prepare for exit and that some caseworkers are avoiding having conversations about exiting the program. A number of families in the AFS said they felt caseworkers had not adequately prepared them for exiting the program. Some families in the study said that caseworkers did not give enough time to prepare them properly for the end of the *Brighter Futures* program; or that caseworkers assumed one or two conversations were adequate preparation for families.

In response to a question asking what families would do after exiting the program if they needed assistance, over 80% said they would call their caseworker. Whilst this indicates a strong relationship with their caseworker it also suggests that families have not been adequately prepared for exit.



Exit conversations can be difficult for caseworkers if they have developed strong relationships with their families; or if the families are reluctant or anxious about the program ending. Families may try to avoid the conversations because it makes them to feel anxious. It is good practice for caseworkers to start conversations as early as possible and give families strategies to help them exit the program. The AFS results show that caseworkers need more support and supervision regarding program exit strategies and timelines. A good exit strategy as early as possible in the program is necessary if outcomes are to be maintained after program completion.

### **Matching cultural background of clients and service providers**

The AFS found that whether the caseworker was Aboriginal or not, was a factor which affected the collaborative relationship families built with their caseworker. Forty-seven per cent of parents (n=37) had an Aboriginal caseworker. Fifty percent of parents (n=40) stated that they would have preferred an Aboriginal caseworker. If the parent was Aboriginal the percentage who wanted an Aboriginal caseworker increased to 57% and if the parent was Aboriginal and they had an Aboriginal caseworker their preference for an Aboriginal caseworker increased to 82% (n=35).

An Aboriginal caseworker explained how her Aboriginality helps to build a relationship with the family:

***“I think that coming from an Aboriginal background myself and having an understanding of what it is like to grow up, identifying as Aboriginal and being exposed to those social expectations and different things like that, growing up and being exposed to racism myself as a child.*”**

***I think having that inside understanding definitely helps whereas somebody who may be non-Indigenous working with the family, might not necessarily know the true meaning or the feeling for those things, if that makes any sense.***

***Definitely the understanding of what connected to community actually means for Aboriginal people as well, that is definitely a big one for me because for a lot of families that’s how they like to identify you, that’s where rapport starts to build if you are able to speak about how you are connected to community and who your family is.”***

The majority of Aboriginal parents in the AFS who preferred an Aboriginal caseworker talked about feeling more comfortable around an Aboriginal caseworker, more confident in their communication, and would feel less judged if they had an Aboriginal caseworker.

***“Because they understand I guess the background, upbringing, I guess, social status.”***

***“Because at least they 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...”***

These results are consistent with a US study which found that 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 misunderstood (Williams, 1997). A number of families talked about feeling very self-conscious about the way they spoke, with many Aboriginal parents, stating that they felt judged about the way they communicated and this impacted on their ability to open up to a non-Aboriginal caseworker.

The AFS qualitative data suggests that, for many Aboriginal families, having an Aboriginal caseworker overcomes the perception of being judged. This is also consistent with 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 services (Lee & Farrell, 2006). These studies were initially done with medical services and have been replicated with mental health services both here and in the US (Ziguras, Klimidis, Lewis, & Stuart, 2003). According to Lee & Farrell (2006) these results suggest a link between racial concordance and the development of a collaborative relationship, and demonstrate the importance of communication within the relationship.

Although numbers in the AFS were small for early exits (n=18) they also suggest that if an Aboriginal parent is placed with a non-Aboriginal caseworker they are more likely to exit the program early. Of the 14 Aboriginal parents who exited the program, 11 had a non-Aboriginal caseworker.

There is currently no data available on how many Aboriginal caseworkers are employed across the *Brighter Futures* program. Results from the SPRC evaluation of *Brighter Futures* indicate that there is a shortage of Aboriginal caseworkers (Hilferty et al., 2010). Given that Aboriginal people make up 2.5% of the NSW population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), and that Aboriginal families represent 32% of the *Brighter Futures* program (Hilferty et al., 2010), it is unlikely that the program will be able to meet the demand for Aboriginal caseworkers in the program.

### Cultural Competence

The limited number of Aboriginal caseworkers in the *Brighter Futures* program raises the issue of cultural competence training. Cultural competence generally refers to a practice of knowledge and skills in working with groups other than one's own (Korbin, 2002). One of the key themes emerging in the literature is the need for non-Aboriginal service providers to participate in cultural competence training (Baldry, Green, & Thorpe, 2006; Boyle & Springer, 2001; Libesman, 2004; Robinson & Tyler, 2006; Westerman, 1997; Wild & Anderson, 2007). There is however no evidence in the literature on whether cultural competence training enables non-Aboriginal caseworkers to build a better relationship with Aboriginal families. Korbin (2002) found that there are still differing opinions on whether cultural competence can even exist if the family and the caseworker are not from the same cultural group.

Before we can understand how cultural competence training for non-Aboriginal caseworkers affects the relationship between families and caseworkers, we need an agreement on what cultural competence training should cover and a consistent approach to training. Interviews with caseworkers indicate that most of them have participated in some form of cultural training, however the training varies within Community Services and the content focuses on past policies and practices which have negatively affected Aboriginal families.

Cultural competence training that addresses the discrimination felt by Aboriginal families should address the stereotypes that exist in our society. There is evidence from the AFS interviews with caseworkers that stereotyping of Aboriginal families exists in the program by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal caseworkers. In a few cases, non-Aboriginal caseworkers questioned why Aboriginal families should have Aboriginal-specific services.

Whilst racist legislation and practices in NSW have been redressed, unconscious racial stereotyping still needs to be addressed. These stereotypes are reinforced through a variety of sources such as the media and past learnings (Wells, Merritt, & Briggs, 2009).

Although this report highlights the need for a formalised cultural competence training program, the study did find evidence that non-Aboriginal caseworkers can build collaborative relationships with Aboriginal families. This is suggested by the finding that if an Aboriginal parent had a non-Aboriginal caseworker, they were less likely to prefer an Aboriginal caseworker. The main reason given for this was that they had successfully established a good working relationship with their non-Aboriginal caseworker and would not want to change caseworkers.

## Continuity of Caseworker

Forty five per cent of families (n=36) experienced at least one change in their caseworker, with 21% of families having experienced more than three changes in caseworkers at the first AFS interview. Sixty two per cent of the families who had experienced a change in their caseworker said that it negatively impacted their time in the *Brighter Futures* program. Families stated that the hardest part was having to retell their story. Families also talked about trust and how hard it was going to be to develop that all over again with the new caseworker. Some families had to overcome a feeling of loss before they could begin to build a relationship with the next caseworker.

***“I have lost someone that I grew to know and supported us no matter what, do you know what I mean, like I just don't feel comfortable at the moment because she is just new, I just don't feel that connection where with the other caseworker, I had a real connection.”***

Some families found that the relationship with the new caseworker was not the same. For a few families a change in caseworker was frequent and this often hindered progress in the *Brighter Futures* program.

For the 32% of families in the AFS who thought that the change in caseworker had no real impact on their progress in the program, the handover was generally well managed with a lot of notice given to the family, and the old and new caseworker both visiting the family a number of times before the handover. A few families reported the change in caseworker as being positive because they built a better relationship with the new caseworker.

Caseworkers tended to underestimate the impact a change in caseworker had on the family, with only 37% thinking the changeover had an impact on the families' progress. Caseworkers and Managers also talked about the importance of the changeover being planned and transparent, acknowledging that when these procedures were followed the family was less likely to be negatively effected. Factors that prevent a smooth transition between caseworkers include poor management, no follow up with the family, caseworker leaving suddenly, and being short staffed. The AFS found case transfers to another area or from Community Services to Lead Agencies (or vice-versa) were poorly planned and managed with often no follow up at all.

## Measuring caseworker and family relationship

Eighty families and 47 caseworkers completed the HRI (Poulin & Young, 1991). Thirty two caseworkers and families completed a full HRI and were able to be matched to each other. For the 80 families, 77% scored higher than 30 or above, indicating they had a good working relationship with their caseworker, and 23% scored caseworkers at equal to or lower than 30, indicating a problematic relationship.

For the 47 caseworkers, 85% scored higher than 30 or above, indicating a good working relationship from the caseworker's perspective; and 15% scored families at equal to or lower than 30, indicating a problematic relationship. As the data was skewed, medians are reported.

**Table 6. Comparison between Caseworker and Family HRI Scores**

| Scales        | Family                            | Caseworker                       | Spearman's correlation |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Structural    | 42<br>Range: 10-50                | 44<br>Range: 24-50               | 0.256                  |
| Interpersonal | 40<br>Range: 10-50                | 40<br>Range: 18-46               | 0.325                  |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>86</b><br><b>Range: 20-100</b> | <b>83</b><br><b>Range: 42-96</b> | <b>0.342</b>           |

Five families had scores of 30 or lower on the structural component, indicating a problematic relationship compared with three caseworkers. Eight families had scores of 30 or lower on the Interpersonal component, indicating a problematic relationship compared with four caseworkers.

These percentages were consistent with the individual scores from families and caseworkers. There was no significant correlation between family's scores and caseworker's scores. This lack of correlation was probably due to the higher percentage of families who scored their relationship with their caseworker in the low range, indicating that caseworkers may not be as perceptive when the relationship starts to break down.

### 3.2 Is the program engaging fathers?

Ninety six per cent of the primary carers in the AFS were women and 75% of these carers were single parents. Of the 25% who had a partner, very few of the fathers were actively engaged in the *Brighter Futures* program. The AFS had three single fathers who successfully engaged with the program. Caseworkers reported difficulties in trying to engage fathers when they were also trying to engage the mothers in the program. This lack of active engagement by fathers who were present in the home often created a barrier to the mother who was engaged in the program. The AFS results suggest that when a father is present in the home and not actively engaged, the program is less successful.

Many caseworkers in the AFS described the father as being 'peripheral or in the shadows' of the program. This created a level of uncertainty, not just for the caseworker but also for the mother in the program. A number of the mothers reported having to limit their involvement in the program because their partner was not engaged in the program, and others reported that it hindered the communication with their caseworker as they were less open when the father was present. A number of mothers also reported that their partner still had concerns about Community Services involvement, creating a level of mistrust towards the program within the household.

All the caseworkers and families thought the *Brighter Futures* program could be successful for fathers, however the program would need to be modified if it was to engage more fathers. Firstly, the program needed to actively recruit more male caseworkers, as both caseworkers and the mothers thought that men communicated in a different way to women, and that they would feel more comfortable engaging with another male. Secondly, both families and caseworkers stated that caseworkers would need to overcome the belief in many men that raising children is women's business. Finally, there is a need for more services targeting men in more flexible times, including the weekend.

More research is needed on the participation, and outcomes, for fathers in early intervention programs (Duggan, et al., 2004; Featherstone, 2005). This is in contrast to the growing body of literature which recognises the direct and indirect effects of fathers attributes on parenting and child outcomes (Duggan, et al., 2004).

### 3.3 Which services were provided by Aboriginal staff or agencies and how did this affect families' experiences of the program?

#### Child Care Services

Sixty-seven (84%) families used child care while in the *Brighter Futures* program and for 62 (78%) of these families Brighter Futures paid for at least part of the fees during the program. Fifty five (82%) of these families were not using child care before *Brighter Futures*. For the children who were not enrolled in child care during the program it was either because the children were too young (n=3); the children were school age (n=3); their parent wanted to keep them at home (n=2); it had not been organised yet (n=5); or it was too expensive (n=2).

When making choices about the child care centre they would enroll their children in, the majority of the families stated that they considered convenience and recommendation to be the most important factors in making the decision. Only nine families said they were sending their children to an Aboriginal child care centre, and only six families felt this was a factor they considered when making the decision about whether to send their child to care. In explaining this, many families stated that they felt that the child care centre they sent their child to was multicultural and celebrated all cultures. Twenty per cent of the families preferred that the child care centre employed at least one Aboriginal childcare worker.

Families were very happy with the services they were receiving from child care with only two families reporting difficulty with the child care centre to which they sent their child. Families talked about a number of benefits to their children from attending child care including socialisation, school readiness, cultural awareness, becoming more confident, less clingy to parent and improvement in speech. These results are consistent with the findings of the Bowes and colleagues (2011) study on the child care choices of Indigenous families across NSW.

Families also talked about the benefits of their children attending child care to themselves, such as having time to do housework, relaxing, sleeping, time out, meeting up with friends; and for a few it meant being able to complete a TAFE course, go back to school or start a part time job.

***“Not having to rely on other people looking after them while I go to work. Knowing they are safe. And knowing that they are happy because they love going to school”.***

Many families in the AFS also attended supported playgroups. The playgroups were especially successful for families who felt socially isolated. In many of these cases the caseworker also attended the playgroup with the family, making the transition a lot less stressful for the families. A number of families who finished the *Brighter Futures* program continued to attend the playgroups. Some families also saw playgroups as a good entry point for their child before starting child care because parents could see first-hand the benefits for their children in socialising with others.

#### Parenting programs

Fifty per cent of families (n = 40) completed a parenting program. It is unclear from the data how many families completed a parenting program that was run by an Aboriginal agency, but the majority of the parenting programs were organised by a non-Aboriginal agency. Of the families who completed a parenting program, 33% stated that they would have preferred an Aboriginal agency, or at least an Aboriginal facilitator running the parenting program. The main reason given for this was that they felt an Aboriginal facilitator would have a better understanding of Aboriginal

families, and be able to communicate their ideas about parenting better than a non-Aboriginal facilitator.

The data shows that families participated in a wide range of parenting programs (over 20 different programs) which were either one-on-one or in groups, and varied from one-off programs to programs that ran over eight weeks with varying success.

Approximately 20% of families did not feel they got anything out of the parenting program, either because it was too much information to take in; they felt they really could not implement the strategies; or because they just did not find the program useful. The 80% of families who found the parenting programs useful reported varying outcomes, such as: benefits to parents' mental health, including becoming more confident as parents; developing better relationships with their children; communicating better (including yelling less); developing structures in the household; developing a better understanding of their children's development; and becoming more consistent with their parenting. Another outcome that came out of group parenting programs was the realisation that they are not alone, that other parents are struggling with parenting as well, and that there is not just one way to parent your children.

It is hard to gauge the success of the parenting programs used in the *Brighter Futures* program as so many different programs were used, and parents were not always able to remember which program they participated in. While there is some evidence for the effectiveness of Triple P for Aboriginal families (Turner, Richards, & Sanders, 2007), more research is needed regarding parenting programs for Aboriginal families, especially those involved with the child protection system.

The AFS data suggests that improving parenting practices is complex, as only 15% of the primary carers in the study thought they had any trouble being a parent. However, 67% of primary carers were seen as having parenting skills as vulnerability on entry into the program. This suggests that many parents who may have benefited from involvement in a parenting program did not see a need for assistance, which may have reduced their involvement and engagement in a parenting program. Most parents however, did feel that parenting programs could be useful, but other factors such as transport, timing, and a feeling they may be judged prevented them from attending.

A number of families in the AFS also participated in the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program, which was part of the home visiting program for families run by the *Brighter Futures* caseworker. The number of families who participated in PAT is not clear because many families were unaware they were in the PAT program. Some of the families who did comment on the PAT program thought it was useful to learn about the development of their child, and that it taught them age-appropriate strategies to deal with different behaviours. A few thought the PAT program was not relevant to them because they perceived their issues to be with their older child/ren, and the PAT program was only developed for younger children.

### **3.4 What services facilitate engagement for Aboriginal families?**

Financial assistance was used by all families in the *Brighter Futures* program and included child care payments, food, furniture, baby needs, extra curricular activities for the children, bills, school excursions, school uniforms, computers, skip bins for rubbish removal and fridges. Families in the AFS found the financial assistance extremely helpful, with many stating it reduced stress levels within the family and solved some of the minor problems within the family quickly. Research also indicates that being able to meet a family's immediate needs leads to successful engagement in the program (Kemp, et al., 2009). While there was evidence that a couple of families in the AFS were becoming dependent on this financial assistance, many caseworkers were able to avoid this by clearly explaining that the financial assistance was temporary, and by encouraging those families who needed it to enrol in a budgeting course.

Another successful component of the *Brighter Futures* program was the advocacy skills provided by the caseworker. These advocacy skills included liaising with Government departments, especially Housing NSW and Centrelink; filling out applications; helping find rental properties; liaising with electricity companies and real-estate agents around overdue bills and rent; organising appointments with counsellors, specialists and speech pathologists; and attending court appearances. These advocacy skills helped build a strong relationship with the caseworker, and families commented that the help was often able to directly reduce the stress levels in the family.

***“... but I think it was helping with the stress levels of just having, the setting up appointments and things like that, networking and finding the right service because, I didn’t know some of the things that were available.”***

### **3.5 Why are families leaving the *Brighter Futures* program early?**

Eighteen (23%) families in the AFS left the program early. The reasons given by the families for early exits were: having met their goals (n=1); poor relationship with the caseworker (n=7); family transferred to child protection (n=7); caseworker closing the case because of lack of engagement (n=4); Aboriginality of caseworker (n=3); change in caseworker (n=1); domestic violence (n=1); and one carer relinquished the care of her children. A number of families gave multiple reasons for their early exit.

Caseworkers thought that families were leaving early for a number of reasons, namely domestic violence and families being overwhelmed by vulnerabilities. Approximately half of the caseworkers thought that domestic violence was a reason that families were leaving the program early.

***“We are getting increasing numbers of families where domestic violence is an issue and those families probably are a little bit harder to engage and they seem to be the families that move around, we have actually, just a couple of months ago did up a lot of statistics about which families we have engaged, which families didn’t stay for long and moved on and when we looked at it, a lot of the families that left early there was DV involved. So they have moved around to get away from the perpetrator or to go back to the perpetrator.”***

The complexities of dealing with domestic violence were also highlighted by one of the families in the AFS:

Interviewer: What was the main reason you left the program?

***“There was not really any reason I just thought it was like too much on my plate. I’m a very personal woman and around about that time I was in like a domestic violence relationship. People are telling me to do this, do that where I just wanted to curl up under a rock and not do anything. I just sort of like I just stopped taking their phone calls and blah, blah, blah. Main reason was that’s the only reason why I was really scared.”***

## 4. Conclusions and lessons learnt

The aim of the AFS was to find out how best to support Aboriginal families to engage in and achieve positive outcomes within the context of an early intervention program. Eighty families participated in the study, along with 47 Caseworkers or Managers' Casework.

Positive outcomes emerged from the study, including that Helpline reports of risk of harm or significant risk of harm were significantly reduced for Aboriginal families participating in the *Brighter Futures* program, and participants in the program were less likely than those in the comparison group to have a child enter OOHC in the 12 months after being assessed for the *Brighter Futures* program.

The *Brighter Futures* program was very well received by the participants in the AFS, with most families (89%) reporting that the program was of help to them, and nearly all families (96%) seeing the program as one that could positively help others.

Aboriginal families participating in this study entered the *Brighter Futures* program through a number of different pathways. Most participants (75%) felt apprehensive about being involved with Community Services given their role in child protection. However, once in the *Brighter Futures* program, most families reported being reassured by caseworkers who explained that the early intervention program was separate to the statutory child protection system.

The strength of the relationship between caseworkers and families was one of the most crucial factors in the successful engagement of families in the *Brighter Futures* program. Families in the program valued the strengths-based approach and commented that this enabled a collaborative relationship between caseworkers and families to develop.

While some families entered the *Brighter Futures* program ready for change, others needed highly skilled caseworkers to assist them to identify the need for change, especially in cases where families had a poor understanding about their vulnerabilities and the children's wellbeing. Caseworkers needed to be sensitive to carers' capacity for change, with the awareness to know when was the right time to offer services and have upfront and honest conversations with the family.

Fifty per cent of the carers in the AFS stated that they would have preferred an Aboriginal caseworker, yet if the carer and caseworker were culturally matched the percentage increased to 82%. However, given the numbers of Aboriginal families in the *Brighter Futures* program it is unlikely that there will be sufficient numbers of Aboriginal caseworkers to meet the demand. This highlights the importance of cultural competence training for non-Aboriginal caseworkers or alternative strategies, such as Aboriginal facilitators, to build the trust between non-Aboriginal caseworkers and Aboriginal families. This study indicates a need for further research on the effectiveness of cultural competency training to assist non-Aboriginal caseworkers in building relationships with Aboriginal families and increase Aboriginal families willingness to access early intervention programs.

The AFS found that it is possible for clients and workers from different cultural backgrounds to have a successful working relationship. The finding that families who had a non-Aboriginal caseworker were less likely to want an Aboriginal caseworker is promising, and indicates that the relationship developed between the client and the caseworker is as important as culturally matched families and workers.

The AFS found that a lack of continuity of caseworker negatively affected a number of families in the *Brighter Futures* program. However, it is important to note that for approximately a third of participants, the change in caseworker did not affect their progress in the program if the handover was well managed, including sufficient notice to the family and the old and new caseworkers



visiting the family several times during the transition. The way in which caseworkers hand over cases is an important practice issue that could be improved in the *Brighter Futures* program.

The AFS found that the *Brighter Futures* program could be better at engaging fathers in the program. Fathers who were living in the household, but not engaging in the program, had a negative effect on the mother's ability to progress in the program. This study suggests that there is a need for caseworker training and professional development on the topic of engaging fathers when both parents reside in the same household. Some of the suggestions made by families and caseworkers to engage fathers in the *Brighter Futures* program include recruiting more male caseworkers, challenging the commonly held belief that raising children is women's business, and more flexible service delivery times for working fathers, such as on weekends.

For the majority of families in this study accessing child care services and supported playgroups brought positive benefits for both children and carers.

The AFS indicates that improving parenting practices is difficult and more research is needed to examine which parenting programs best meet the needs of Aboriginal families.

The study found practical assistance, such as financial assistance and housing provided through caseworker advocacy, were positively received by the families. Previous research has also found that meeting a family's immediate needs will lead to a higher engagement and more positive outcomes from the program (Kemp et al, 2009).

In conclusion, through interviewing families for the AFS, valuable insights were gained about working with Aboriginal families, in particular the factors leading to successful engagement with families and the kind of assistance that is most beneficial. However, there were limitations with the study that can be addressed in further research, including the limitations of qualitative research methodology, the unrepresentative sample, and the bias toward Aboriginal families who were more likely to engage in an early intervention program.

There is a need for further research to inform policy and practice development on how to improve access to early intervention programs and positive outcomes for Aboriginal families. In particular, the effectiveness of cultural competency training for non-Aboriginal caseworkers; identifying the factors that make services effective for Aboriginal families, whether services have better outcomes for their clients if delivered by an Aboriginal agency; and the benefits of a strength-based approach.

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# Appendix A

## **Brighter Futures Aboriginal Families Study Consultations and Briefings**

NOTE: Many of the consultations and briefings were a combined session, involving representations from both Community Services staff and NGO representatives.

### **Consultations and Briefings**

| <b>AGENCY</b>   | <b>CONSULTATIONS<br/>2008</b> | <b>BRIEFINGS<br/>2009 / 2010</b> |
|---|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>COMMUNITY SERVICES</b>   |                               |                                  |
| <i>Head Office</i>  | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| - Aboriginal Services Branch  | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| - State Aboriginal Reference Group (ARG)  | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| - Prevention & Early Intervention Branch  |                               |                                  |
| - Complaints Unit   |                               |                                  |
| <i>Met West</i>   |                               |                                  |
| - Mt Druitt CSC   | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| - St Marys CSC  |                               | ✓                                |
| - Penrith CSC   |                               | ✓                                |
| - Met West BF Working Group (attended by representatives from Met West CSC staff and representatives from Junaya for Families (Blacktown), South Penrith Youth Network Services (SPYNS Aboriginal program), Wesley Mission (Blacktown)) | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| <i>Hunter/Central Coast</i>   | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| - Charlestown CSC (attended by staff from Raymond Terrace, Edgeworth, Maitland and Cessnock CSCs)   | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| <i>Northern</i>   |                               |                                  |

| <b>AGENCY</b>   | <b>CONSULTATIONS<br/>2008</b> | <b>BRIEFINGS<br/>2009 / 2010</b> |
|---|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| - Ballina CSC   | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| - Lismore CSC   | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| <i>Southern</i>   |                               |                                  |
| - Nowra CSC   | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| - Wollongong CSC  | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| <i>Western</i>  |                               | ✓                                |
| - Dubbo CSC   |                               |                                  |
| <b>NGOs</b><br><i>Statewide</i>   |                               |                                  |
| - Board of the Aboriginal Child, Family & Community Care<br>State Secretariat (AbSec) | ✓                             |                                  |
| <i>Sydney region</i><br>- SDN Children's Services                                     |                               | ✓                                |
| <i>Hunter/Central Coast</i><br>- UnitingCare Burnside<br>(Gosford)                    |                               | ✓                                |
| - Benevolent Society<br>(Newcastle)   |                               | ✓                                |
| - Samaritans (Newcastle)  |                               | ✓                                |
| - Wandiyali Aboriginal Corp<br>(Newcastle)  | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| <i>Met South West</i>   |                               |                                  |
| - Tharawal Aboriginal Co-Op   | ✓                             | ✓                                |

| <b>AGENCY</b>                                       | <b>CONSULTATIONS<br/>2008</b> | <b>BRIEFINGS<br/>2009 / 2010</b> |
|---|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| (Campbelltown)                                      |                               | ✓                                |
| <i>Northern</i><br>- Casino Neighbourhood<br>Centre | ✓                             |                                  |
| - Consortium of<br>Neighbourhood Centres            | ✓                             |                                  |
| - Rekindling the Spirit<br>(Lismore)                | ✓                             |                                  |
| - Lismore Family Support                            | ✓                             |                                  |
| - YWCA Lismore                                      | ✓                             |                                  |
| - Lismore Aboriginal<br>Women's Refuge              | ✓                             |                                  |
| <i>Southern</i>                                     |                               |                                  |
| - SDN Children's Services<br>(Eurobodalla)          | ✓                             |                                  |
| - CareSouth Wollongong                              | ✓                             |                                  |
| - Mission Australia (Nowra)                         | ✓                             |                                  |
| - Bega Valley Shire Council                         | ✓                             |                                  |
| <i>Western</i><br>- Barnardos (Dubbo)               | ✓                             | ✓                                |
| - UnitingCare Burnside<br>(Dubbo)                   | ✓                             | ✓                                |

# Appendix B

## Membership: *Brighter Futures* Aboriginal Family Study Report Steering Group

### **Community Services**

Divisional Director

Policy & Planning

A/Director

Research Centre

Manager (Intensive Family Based Services & Prevention and Early Intervention)

Aboriginal Services Branch

A/Assistant Director

Corporate Reporting

Information Management Branch

A/Director

Evaluation & Statistics

A/Director

Prevention & Early Intervention

### **External**

A/Operations Manager

Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec)

Director

Social Policy Research Centre

University of NSW, Kensington

# Appendix C

## Aboriginal Families Study

### Part 1 – The Interview

#### ATTENTION INTERVIEWER:

One of the aims of the Aboriginal Families Study is to find out how Aboriginal families are going in the *Brighter Futures* Program. Please commence the interview by asking the following 2 questions as a conversation starter. Ensure that you encourage families to tell their stories, both positive and negative, about their experiences of the program.

*Before we start with the more formal questions can you just talk about your experiences with the program?*

*What has the Brighter Futures program been like for you?*

Continue with the rest of the interview.

#### A. ENTERING THE PROGRAM

**Purpose:** Do program entry pathways work well for families? What factors most encourage or hinder entry?

*I would now like to ask you a few questions about how you got involved with the Brighter Futures program*

- A.1** How did you find out about the *Brighter Futures* program?  
*(Probe if no response from family: through other family/friends, saw it being advertised, Caseworker paid a visit and told you about it).*
- A.2** How did you get involved? What was that like for you?
- A.3** Did you have any concerns about working with DoCS?
- A.4** What were the main reasons you decided to get involved in the program?

#### B. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN THE PROGRAM

**Purpose:** Is the program engaging fathers and extended family members?

- B.1** Are other family members involved in the program with you?
- B.2** If yes, who are they and how are they involved?  
*(Probe: Father/other male care giver, other family)*
- B.3** Is it helpful having other family members involved?  
**Yes** (why)                      **No** (why)
- B.4** How did you feel having other family members involved?
- B.5** Do you think *Brighter Futures* is suitable for fathers?



If so in what way?

If no, how do you think it could be suitable to fathers?

### C. RETENTION IN PROGRAM

**Purpose:** What factors led to families staying in or leaving the program? Are they achieving their goals?

- C.1** How long have you been in the program?
- C.2** What are the main reasons why you are staying with the program?  
(Probe: caseworker, financial assistance, help with parenting, etc)
- C.3** Of these reasons, which of these would you say was the **one most important** reason?
- C.4** What goals are you hoping to achieve whilst in *Brighter Futures*?
- C.5** Do you feel that you will achieve these goals?  
If yes, how will *Brighter Futures* help you achieve these goals?  
If no, why not?

### D. OVERALL PROGRAM

**Purpose:** What is the experience of Aboriginal families in the program?

*I would like to ask you a few questions about how helpful you think the Brighter Futures program has been for you.*

- D.1** What are the main things that Brighter Futures helps you and your family with?
- D.2** How do these things help?
- D.3** How would you rank the level of help you are getting from the program?  
**Not at all      A little      Moderately      A lot      Undecided**
- D.4** Would you recommend Brighter Futures to a friend or other family member?  
 Yes  No  
**Why?**
- D.5** What would you do after you have left the program and you felt like you needed more help?

### E. SERVICE COMPONENTS

**Purpose:** What is the experience of Aboriginal families of each service component?

*I would now like to ask a few questions about the services you received whilst in the program.*

## ➔ Childcare

- E.1** Has Brighter Futures provided childcare for your children?  
If no why?  
(prompt: if they didn't want childcare what were the main reasons?)  
**(now go to Parenting Program section on next page)**

**If Yes,**

- E.2** Was the childcare provided by an Aboriginal agency?

Yes  No

**E.3** If Yes/No, do you think this made any difference to you or your child's experience of the service?

**E.4** Were there Aboriginal childcare workers employed at the childcare centre?

Yes  No

**E.5** If Yes/No, do you think this made any difference to you or your child's experience of the service?

**E.6** Were you using childcare before you participated in *Brighter Futures*?

Yes  No

**E.7** If no, what were the reasons for not using it?

**E.8** How did *Brighter Futures* help you to use childcare?

*(prompts e.g. financial assistance, help with transport, finding a place, etc)*

**E.9** For the time that your child was in childcare, do you think **they benefited** from childcare and how? *(e.g. learns to play with others, improved language and cognitive skills, improved behaviour)*

**E.10** Are there any **benefits for you** from your child attending childcare? *(e.g. improved confidence as a parent, meet other parents, link with other services)*

**E.11** Is your child still attending childcare?

If no, why? – has this impacted on your child? If yes, how?

If yes, has anything changed? (prompt: childcare centre, days in care)

## ➔ Parenting Programs

**E.12** Have you attended a parenting program whilst with *Brighter Futures*?

If no, why not?

**E.13** Do you think you need help with parenting?

If yes, what type of help would you like?

**E.14** Do you think that parenting programs are useful?

**(Now go to Home Visiting section on next page)**

**If yes, go to E.15 (on top of next page)**

**E.15** Did you attend  one-to-one parenting program **(Go to E.17)** or  
 a group parenting program

**E.16** If a group parenting program, were there other Aboriginal families in the program?

**E.17** Was the parenting program run by an Aboriginal worker?

**E.18** If yes/no, do you think this made any difference to your experience of the program?

**E.19** How many sessions of the parenting program did you go to?

**E.20** What did you think of it?

**E.21** Have you been able to use anything you learnt from the program?

If yes, what sort of things?

- E.22** Do you think your child(ren) benefited from you doing the parenting program?  
If yes, in what ways?
- E.23** Do you think you benefited from doing the parenting program?  
If yes, in what ways?
- E.24** Do you think the things you have learnt from the parenting program will be helpful in the future?  
If yes, how?

## ➔ Home visiting

- E.25** Does a caseworker come and visit you at home on a regular basis?  
If no, why not?  
**(Now go to Casework section on next page)**  
**If yes, go to E.26 on top of next page**
- E.26** When your case worker visits you do they teach you or show you how to do things with your child?  
 Yes  No **(go to Casework Section below)**
- E.27** What sorts of things did you find helpful?
- E.28** What wasn't helpful?

## ➔ Casework

Reassure interviewee that their responses to these questions are **strictly confidential** and will not be fed back to their caseworker.

- E.29** How often do you meet with your caseworker?
- E.30** Where did you usually meet?  Your place  The office  
How did you find this?
- E.31** What problems does your caseworker help you with?
- E.32** Is your caseworker Aboriginal?  
 Yes  No
- E.33** If you had a choice, would you prefer to have an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal caseworker  
 Aboriginal  Non-Aboriginal
- E.34** Why is this?
- E.35** For your time in the *Brighter Futures* program, how many caseworkers have you had?  
**PROMPT:** *If they had multiple caseworkers, ask if they felt that this impacted on their progress/success in BF? If yes, then get them to explain?*
- E.36** What is your relationship like with your caseworker?
- E.37** Do you think the relationship you have with your caseworker has impacted on your time in *Brighter Futures*?

## ➔ Financial support

**E.38** Do you receive financial support through *Brighter Futures*?

Yes  No

**E.39** If Yes, in what way (e.g. *child care costs, white goods, bill payments, etc.*)?

## ➔ Other support

**E.40** Are you receiving any other support services?

Yes  No

If yes, please describe

### F. PROGRAM BENEFITS

**Purpose:** What are the perceptions of families the impacts of the program on child and family functioning? Have there been any flow-on effects to the siblings of study child?

**F.1** Have you noticed any changes in your child since you participated in *Brighter Futures*? (*improved behaviour; their ability to learn; their relationships with others*)

**F.2** Have you noticed any changes in how you parent your child since you participated in *Brighter Futures*? (e.g. *confidence, feel more supported*)

**ASK F.3 AND F.4 ONLY IF THERE ARE SIBLINGS TO THE STUDY CHILD otherwise go to G.1**

**F.3** Have you noticed any changes in your other children since you participated in *Brighter Futures*?

If yes, in what way?

**F.4** Have you noticed any changes in how you parent your other children since you participated in *Brighter Futures*?

If yes, in what way?

### G. PROGRESS IN THE PROGRAM

**Purpose:** Do families feel empowered enough to cope with problems? Do families feel that their needs are being met?

**G.1** Since starting *Brighter Futures*, do you now feel more able to cope with problems as they arise in your daily life?

If yes, what makes you more able to cope?

If no, why not?

**G.2** Overall do you think the program is meeting your needs and the needs of your family?

**G.3** Do you think the Brighter Future's program could be better for Aboriginal families?

If yes, how?

**G.4** Is there anything you would like to add that may not have been covered in our discussion?

*End of Interview*

# Appendix D

## Aboriginal Families Study

### Caseworker Interview

Get caseworkers consent on tape and then state today's date and their caseworker interview number.

Today's date: \_\_\_\_\_ Caseworker Number \_\_\_\_\_

#### GENERAL QUESTIONS

**Purpose:** To find out about caseworkers experience working with Aboriginal families in the *Brighter Futures* Program.

#### Caseworker background

1. Are you Aboriginal?
2. Can you tell me a little about your professional background?
  - How many years of experience do you have working in Community Services as a child protection caseworker (and/or) working in similar 'EIP –type' programs outside Community Services?
  - How much experience have you had working with Aboriginal families?
3. Can you describe what you do in *Brighter Futures*?
  - Outline your role and length of time working in the program?
  - What is your caseload?

What are your qualifications?

Have you completed any on-the-job training on working with Aboriginal families?

If yes, please specify what training.

How helpful do you think your training has been?

**Prompt: If not mentioned, ask them about training specifically to further their skills working with Aboriginal families.**

4. On a scale of 1 to 10 how competent do you feel you are in understanding the social issues that face Aboriginal families  
0 - not at all competent    5 - some competence    10 - completely competent
5. Overall, how many Aboriginal families have you had on your caseload?  
How many have withdrawn? Do you know why they chose to withdraw?
6. Do you believe that Aboriginal families have different needs as opposed to non-Aboriginal families? Please explain.

## Client Engagement

7. What strategies have you found to be most effective in engaging Aboriginal clients in this program?
- Discuss main facilitators/barriers – how confident do you feel in engaging Aboriginal families?

**Prompt: Do you see Community Services involvement in the program a barrier to engaging families? If so how did you deal with that?**

- How many Aboriginal men have you engaged into the program?
- Are there any issues in relation to engaging Aboriginal men into the program?
- Do you think the *Brighter Futures* program is suitable for Aboriginal men?

If yes why,

If no, what could make it suitable?

8. Can you explain why engaging with local Aboriginal Communities is important?
9. Have you come across families who did not want an Aboriginal Caseworker?

## Brighter Futures Services

10. Can you describe the *Brighter Futures* services that the Aboriginal families you work with use?
- What type?
  - Who delivers the services?

**Prompt: did you engage with Aboriginal Community Organisations for services for your families? If no, Why?**

**or**

**Families did not want to attend local Aboriginal services. If yes – do you know why?**

- How accessible were these services for your families?
  - Are they culturally specific? Are they effective services?
11. Give examples of the parts/combinations of services which appear to be most successful for Aboriginal families?
- Discuss key strengths/problems / any different to the services for non-Aboriginal families?

## Overall Brighter Futures Program Questions

12. Can you discuss the main facilitators/barriers that you have faced when implementing the program (as it is intended) for Aboriginal families?
- Are any specific parts of the program that are easier/harder to implement? Or parts that work better for Aboriginal families?
  - Have there been any major changes in the way the program has been implemented for Aboriginal families over time?
13. In your experience with the program, which types of vulnerabilities do you think the program works best for?
- Give examples/discuss why (Discuss in relation to Aboriginal families.) What were the 'stand out' problems that you helped your clients with?
11. Overall how well do you think the program caters for the needs of Aboriginal families? If there were any aspects you could change to make the program more accommodating for Aboriginal families what would it be?

12. Do you think the Aboriginal families you have helped fitted the eligibility criteria for *Brighter Futures*?

### CASEWORK WITH INDIVIDUAL FAMILY

**Purpose:** To explore caseworkers experience working with Aboriginal families in the *Brighter Futures* Program more specifically

Reassure Caseworker that their responses to these questions are **strictly confidential** and **will not** be fed back to their client or manager.

Of the families you referred to the AFS, we have identified one family which was interviewed and we are now going to ask you some questions about this family.

**You need to base your responses to the following questions on this family.**

### RETENTION IN PROGRAM

**Purpose:** What factors led to families staying in or leaving the program?

1. Can you tell me a little bit about the family?  
What vulnerabilities did they present with?
  - Do you think that the family you are working with are suitable for *Brighter Futures*?
  - If No, why?
2. How long has the family been in the program?
3. How long have you been their caseworker?
  - How many caseworkers have they had?
  - Can you tell me why there was a change in caseworker?
  - How was the changeover managed?
  - Do you think this has impacted on how the family has progressed in the program?
4. What do you think are the main reasons they are staying with the program (or the main reason they left)?

**Probe caseworker: financial assistance, help with parenting, etc OR if they left – the reason why they left.**

### OVERALL PROGRAM

**Purpose:** What is the experience of Aboriginal families in the program?

*I would like to ask you a few questions about how helpful you think the *Brighter Futures* program has been for the family*

1. What are the main things that *Brighter Futures* helps the family with?
  - What services are they receiving?
2. How do you think these things help?
3. Have they made use of the services they are receiving?  
If no, why not?
4. Have they rejected any services you have offered them?  
If yes, why?
5. How do you think the family are going on the program?

6. Are you noticing any changes to the family?

If yes what?

7. What do you think the family would do after they left the program if they felt they needed more help?

**PROGRAM BENEFITS**

**Purpose:** What are the perceptions of caseworkers of the impacts of the program on child and family functioning? Any impacts on siblings of study child?

1. Have you noticed any changes in the study child since they participated in *Brighter Futures*? (*improved behaviour; their ability to learn; their relationships with others*)

**Note: Start with study child. This is in the family information sheet..**

No.

If Yes, in what way? How would you rate the changes?

Not a lot    A little            Somewhat            A fair bit            A great deal

2. Have you noticed any changes in how your client parents the study child since they participated in *Brighter Futures*? (*e.g. confidence, feel more supported*)

No.

If Yes, in what way? How would you rate the changes?

Not a lot    A little            Somewhat            A fair bit            A great deal

**ASK 3. AND 4. ONLY IF THERE ARE SIBLINGS TO THE STUDY CHILD otherwise turn tape off and go to E.27**

3. Have you noticed any changes in the families' other children since they participated in *Brighter Futures*?

If yes, in what way?

4. Have you noticed any changes in how your family parents their other children since they participated in *Brighter Futures*?

If yes, in what way?

*End of Interview*



# Appendix E

## Aboriginal Families Study

### Managers Casework Interview

Get Managers consent on tape and then state today's date and their interview number.

Today's date: \_\_\_\_\_ Manager Number \_\_\_\_\_

#### GENERAL QUESTIONS

**Purpose:** To find out about Managers experience working with Aboriginal families in the *Brighter Futures* Program

#### Manager background

1. Are you Aboriginal?
2. Can you tell me a little about your professional background?
  - How many years of experience do you have working in Community Services/Lead Agency as a Manager (and/or) working in similar 'EIP –type' programs outside Community Services?
  - How much experience have you had working with Aboriginal families?
3. Can you describe what you do in *Brighter Futures*?
4. Outline your role and length of time working in the program?
  - How many caseworkers do you oversee?
  - How do you decide which families are eligible for the program? What are the factors you take into consideration
  - How do you allocate families to caseworkers? (is Aboriginality a factor taken into consideration)
  - How many of your caseworkers are Aboriginal?
  - Do you think it is necessary to have Aboriginal caseworkers on staff when your program includes Aboriginal families?
5. What are your qualifications?
  - Have you completed any on-the-job training?
  - If yes, please specify what training.
  - How helpful do you think your training has been?

**Prompt: If not mentioned, ask them about training specifically to further their skills working with Aboriginal families.**

6. On a scale of 1 to 10 how competent do you feel you are in understanding the social issues that face Aboriginal families?

0 - not at all competent    5 - some competence    10 - completely competent

7. Overall, how many Aboriginal families are your caseworkers managing?

- How many have withdrawn?
- Do you know why they chose to withdraw?
- Do you believe that Aboriginal families have different needs as opposed to non-Aboriginal families? Please explain.

### **Client Engagement**

8. What strategies have you found to be most effective in engaging Aboriginal families in this program?

- Discuss main facilitators/barriers
- How confident does your team feel in engaging Aboriginal families?

**Prompt: Do you see Community Services involvement in the program a barrier to engaging families? If so, how did you deal with that?**

- How many Aboriginal men has your team engaged into the program?
- Are there any issues in relation to engaging Aboriginal men into the program?
- Do you think the *Brighter Futures* program is suitable for Aboriginal men?  
If yes why,  
If no, what could make it suitable?

9. Can you explain why engaging with local Aboriginal Communities is important?

10. Have you come across families who did not want an Aboriginal Caseworker?

### **Brighter Futures Services**

11. Can you describe the *Brighter Futures* services that the Aboriginal families you work with use?

- What type?
- Who delivers the services?

**Prompt: Did your team engage with Aboriginal Community Organisations for services for your families? If no, why?**

**or**

**Families did not want to attend local Aboriginal services. If yes – do you know why?**

- How accessible were these services for your Aboriginal families?
- Are they culturally specific? Are they effective services?

12. Give examples of the parts/combinations of services which appear to be most successful for Aboriginal families?

- Discuss key strengths/problems / any different to the services for non Aboriginal families?

### **Overall Brighter Futures Program Questions**

13. Can you discuss the main facilitators/barriers that you have seen when implementing the program (as it is intended) for Aboriginal families?

- Are any specific parts of the program that are easier/harder to implement? Or parts that work better for Aboriginal families?
  - Have there been any major changes in the way the program has been implemented for Aboriginal families over time?
14. In your experience with the program, which types of vulnerabilities do you think the program works best for?
- Give examples/discuss why (Discuss in relation to Aboriginal families) What were the 'stand out' problems that you helped your clients with?
15. Overall how well do you think the program caters for the needs of Aboriginal families? If there were any aspect you could change to make the program more accommodating for Aboriginal families what would it be?
16. Do you think the Aboriginal families allocated to your caseworkers have fitted the eligibility criteria for *Brighter Futures*? And, has this changed at all during their time in the *Brighter Futures* Program? If yes, what happens then?
17. How important do you think caseworker and family relationships are?
- What factors do you think contribute to a good relationship?
  - What happens when a caseworker and a family do not have a good relationship?
  - How do you manage caseworker family relationships

#### **MANAGER WORK WITH THE INDIVIDUAL FAMILY**

**Purpose:** To explore Managers experience working with Aboriginal families in the *Brighter Futures* Program more specifically.

Reassure Manager that their responses to these questions are **strictly confidential**.

Of the families referred to the AFS by a member of your team, we have identified one or more families which were interviewed and we are now going to ask you some questions about this family/families.

**You need to base your responses to the following questions on this family.**

18. How long have you been the Manager in this case?
19. How many caseworkers have they had? If more than one ask the following:
- Can you tell me why there was a change in caseworker?
  - How was the changeover managed?
  - Do you think this has impacted on how the family has progressed in the program?
20. What do you think are the main reasons they are staying with the program (or the main reason they left)?
- Do you think the caseworker and family have worked well together?
  - If yes, what were the factors that contributed to this?
  - If no, why do you think they did not work well together?
21. Is there anything you would like to add that may not have been covered in our discussion?

*End of Interview*

# Appendix F

## Helpline Relationship Inventory - Client

|     | <b>I am now going to ask you some questions about how you and your caseworker work well together.</b>         | Not at all | A little | Some what | A fair bit | A great deal |
|-----|---|------------|----------|-----------|------------|--------------|
|     |   | 1          | 2        | 3         | 4          | 5            |
| 1.  | Do you have much to say in working out how <b>you and your</b> caseworker will work together?                 |            |          |           |            |              |
| 2.  | Have you and your caseworker talked about the problem(s) with which <b>you</b> are seeking help with?         |            |          |           |            |              |
| 3.  | How much of a say do you have in deciding on which of those problems <b>you</b> wanted to deal with together? |            |          |           |            |              |
| 4.  | Do you and your caseworker talk about the goals <b>you</b> hope to achieve?                                   |            |          |           |            |              |
| 5.  | Do you have a say in deciding what goals <b>you</b> wanted to work on?  |            |          |           |            |              |
| 6.  | Do you and your caseworker talk about the actions <b>you</b> will take to overcome your problems?             |            |          |           |            |              |
| 7.  | Do you and your caseworker talk about what <b>they</b> will do to help you overcome your problems?            |            |          |           |            |              |
| 8.  | How much have you and your caseworker talked about how <b>your progress</b> is going to be assessed?          |            |          |           |            |              |
| 9.  | How much of a say do you have in deciding how <b>you and your</b> caseworker will assess your progress?       |            |          |           |            |              |
| 10. | Do you and your caseworker talk very much about how <b>you</b> are going?                                     |            |          |           |            |              |
| 11. | Do you feel that your caseworker pays attention to you?   |            |          |           |            |              |

|     |   |  |  |  |  |  |
|-----|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| 12. | Do you think that you and your caseworker have the same understanding of what <b>your</b> problems are? |  |  |  |  |  |
| 13. | Does talking with your caseworker help you get more organised about resolving <b>your</b> problems?     |  |  |  |  |  |
| 14. | Do you find that talking with your caseworker has a calming, soothing effect on you?                    |  |  |  |  |  |
| 15. | Does talking with your caseworker give you hope?  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 16. | Does your caseworker help you think more clearly about your problems?                                   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 17. | Does talking with your caseworker help you believe more in yourself?                                    |  |  |  |  |  |
| 18. | Overall, do you feel that you and your caseworker see things in similar ways?                           |  |  |  |  |  |
| 19. | Does your caseworker help you think more clearly about yourself?  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 20. | Do you feel that you and your caseworker are alike in some ways?  |  |  |  |  |  |

# Appendix G

## Helpline Relationship Inventory – Caseworker

|     | <b>I am now going to ask you some questions about how you and your CLIENT work well together.</b>                              | Not at all | A little | Some what | A fair bit | A great deal |
|-----|--|------------|----------|-----------|------------|--------------|
|     |  | 1          | 2        | 3         | 4          | 5            |
| 1.  | How much input does your client have in determining how your work together will be approached?                                 |            |          |           |            |              |
| 2.  | How much have you and your client discussed the specific problem(s) with which he or she wants help?                           |            |          |           |            |              |
| 3.  | How clear are you about the specific problem(s) that you and your client are addressing?                                       |            |          |           |            |              |
| 4.  | To what extent have you and your client discussed the specific goal(s) you hope to accomplish in your work together?           |            |          |           |            |              |
| 5.  | How much input does your client have in determining the goals he or she is working on?   |            |          |           |            |              |
| 6.  | How clear are you about your client's goals?   |            |          |           |            |              |
| 7.  | To what extent have you and your client discussed the specific actions he or she will take to address his or her difficulties? |            |          |           |            |              |
| 8.  | How clear are you about the actions you are taking?  |            |          |           |            |              |
| 9.  | How much input does your client have in determining how you and your client will assess his or her progress?                   |            |          |           |            |              |
| 10. | How clear are you about how you and your client are assessing his or her progress?   |            |          |           |            |              |
| 11. | Do you explain to your client your understanding of his or her difficulties?   |            |          |           |            |              |

|     |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|-----|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| 12. | Is your client's understanding of his or her difficulties similar to your own?                       |  |  |  |  |  |
| 13. | Do you enjoy meeting and talking with your client?   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 14. | Is your client more organised about resolving his or her difficulties as a result of talking to you? |  |  |  |  |  |
| 15. | Does talking with you have a calming, soothing effect on your client?                                |  |  |  |  |  |
| 16. | Are you able to handle the emotional aspects of your client's difficulties?                          |  |  |  |  |  |
| 17. | Does talking with you give your client hope?   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 18. | In general, do you feel you and your client see things in similar ways?                              |  |  |  |  |  |
| 19. | Do you help your client think more clearly about himself or herself?                                 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 20. | Do you feel that you and your client are alike in some ways?   |  |  |  |  |  |

# Appendix H

## NVivo Coding Frameworks: Qualitative Interviews

| FAMILIES  | BRIGHTER FUTURES STAFF   |
|---|--|
| <b>Entry experiences</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How families entered the program</li> <li>• Main reason family joined</li> <li>• Concerns on entry</li> <li>• Goals on entry</li> </ul>   | <b>Engagement issues</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement strategies</li> <li>• Engagement barriers</li> <li>• Engaging fathers</li> <li>• Engaging with Aboriginal organisations</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Brighter Futures Services</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home visiting</li> <li>• Children’s services</li> <li>• Parenting programs</li> <li>• Financial assistance</li> <li>• Advocacy</li> </ul>   | <b>Brighter Futures Services</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home visiting</li> <li>• Children’s services</li> <li>• Parenting programs</li> <li>• Financial assistance</li> <li>• Advocacy</li> <li>• Barriers to implementing BF services</li> <li>• What services work best for Aboriginal families</li> </ul> |
| <b>Issues arising</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship with caseworker</li> <li>• Actions and strategies of the caseworker</li> <li>• Transport</li> <li>• Internal family issues</li> <li>• Communication</li> </ul>  | <b>Caseworker/Family relationship</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship with family</li> <li>• Aboriginality of caseworker</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Program effectiveness</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What works for families</li> <li>• What doesn’t work</li> <li>• What has no impact</li> <li>• Why are they staying</li> <li>• Would they recommend the program</li> <li>• Are they achieving goals</li> <li>• Father’s involvement in BF</li> </ul> | <b>Program effectiveness</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What works for families</li> <li>• What doesn’t work</li> <li>• What has no impact</li> <li>• Why are they staying</li> <li>• Are they achieving goals</li> <li>• Father’s involvement in BF</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Services provided by Aboriginal Agencies</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parenting programs</li> <li>• Children’s services</li> </ul>   | <b>Services provided by Aboriginal Agencies</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parenting programs</li> <li>• Children’s services</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family functioning</li> <li>• Changes in parent</li> <li>• Changes in children</li> <li>• Assistance families are receiving</li> </ul>   | <b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family functioning</li> <li>• Changes in parent</li> <li>• Changes in children</li> <li>• Assistance families are receiving</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Exiting the program</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main reason families leaving</li> <li>• Exit experiences</li> <li>• Sustainability</li> <li>• What will families do after BF</li> </ul>   | <b>Exiting the program</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main reason families leaving early</li> <li>• Exit experiences</li> </ul>  |
|   | <b>Needs of Aboriginal families</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is BF catering to their needs</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Preference for Aboriginal specific services</li> </ul>  |
|   | <b>Staff Characteristics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualifications</li> <li>• Experience in Early Intervention</li> <li>• Cultural competency training</li> </ul>  |
|   | <b>Brighter Futures program</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes to implementation of <i>Brighter Futures</i> for Aboriginal families</li> </ul>   |





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