



"A great start!" Home-Start, an evaluation of Home-Start Early Parenting Program

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Copelen Child & Family Services, 1997

Copelen Child and Family Services is a well-established child welfare agency of the Uniting Church, and was originally The Methodist Babies Home in South Yarra. It was ahead of most agencies in shifting from institutional care of infants and creating high quality foster care programs as well as a range of innovative services aimed at strengthening families and reaching them before they fall over the edge of the cliff into child abuse and neglect. Along with its commitment to finding new ways of reaching out to families, Copelen Child & Family Services has put resources into research and evaluation. In recent years it has attempted to respond to the needs of families who are living in the outer suburbs of Melbourne's growth corridor areas, and in 1995 established an Early Parenting Program in the City of Casey, one of the fastest growing urban areas in Australia. This publication is the evaluation of that program.

A distinctive feature of the program is its incorporation of a volunteer based home visiting program, at the agency's own expense, within a family support and counselling service funded by the State Government. This evaluation is very timely as there is now a renewed interest at both Commonwealth and State levels in Home Visiting Programs and one of the major issues confronting the field is how such programs can be best linked with family support services. The home visiting component was based on the UK Home-Start program as developed by Margaret Harrison back in 1974. It has spread steadily across the UK since then and was introduced to Australia in 1989 by the University of Newcastle Family Action Centre. Some of the Australian Home-Start programs established in the last few years have had great difficulty in securing ongoing funding and a number of programs, particularly in rural NSW, have recently collapsed as a result.

The families served by this particular program, as one might expect given its

location in a growth corridor area, are predominantly two parent families with young children buying their own home. While most families had at least one adult in employment, about one third of the families in the program were dependent on Social Security benefits and these were mostly single mother headed households. Limited services, poor public transport, and financial pressures due to home ownership place pressures on many families in Casey in addition to the 'normal adjustment' to parenthood. Sources of referral to the service include universal services such as hospitals, community health centres and maternal and child health services, as well as tertiary services such as the statutory child protection service.

Post-natal depression and child behaviour problems feature strongly in the presenting problems as defined by the parents. This is a fascinating window through which we can see the emerging construction of problems in family life. For example, the prevalent identification of 'post-natal depression' raises questions about whether this is best seen as a clinical disorder or as a situational reaction in which maternal stress and exhaustion are a function of gender-based role overload and social isolation. Similarly, does their high level of identification of child behaviour problems reflect the real magnitude of conduct 'disorders' in children or does it reflect a crisis in confidence among contemporary parents about discipline and child rearing? Obviously these are complex issues in which a range of bio-psycho-social factors may be involved, but it suggests that we may be witnessing in the 1990s a medicalised and psychologised construction of phenomena which might previously have been seen as struggles in family life which have predominantly social origins.

It is important that we do not stereotype growth corridors and 'dormitory suburbs' as social wastelands. A recent study

undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies actually found much stronger neighbourhood interaction in the outer urban areas than in the middle suburbs, which in turn had more neighbour interaction than in the inner suburbs which are often romanticised as cohesive communities. Similarly a pattern of frequent interaction within the extended family which was typically located in radial spokes from the city and in proximity to the wife's family of origin, was identified on the outer urban fringe. Neighbourhood and extended family interaction may therefore be stronger in the outer suburbs of our large cities. This is not to say that some families in such locations are not among the most isolated in the community, but it is worth noting that in the Copelen program 80% of the families did have access to informal social support networks and only 'in a small number of cases' had family relationships broken down to the degree that parents felt unable to ask for support. Whether such support is enough, however, is the issue. Even with supportive extended families, women at home for up to 12 hours a day caring for very young children, or trying to manage as sole parents, are often placed under great stress.

The evaluation describes how the program co-ordinator undertakes an initial assessment in relation to what the parents define as their primary problems, and objectives and plans are developed in relation to these which are then the focus of the parent resource worker's intervention. The nature of the service is flexibly tailored to the family's needs. It might involve baby-sitting and other practical assistance, child management strategies, emotional support or linking the family into the community through groups and other services. The intervention is structured in 6 to 8 week 'episodes', a structure imposed by the government funding source which was focussed on short term interventions and a high turnover of families. While this

appears to have had some advantages in providing a focus for change and periodic points for the agency and the family to 'take stock' of what has been achieved, many families have required a longer service than this.

One of the advantages of internal agency evaluation is that they know the 'inside story' and can explore issues which an external evaluator might miss. For example, this evaluation explores the difficult issues associated with sharing of information about families across staff from different professional backgrounds. However, one of the disadvantages of an internal evaluation is a tendency to accept the agency and funding source limitations on the program model as 'givens' and at times one can clearly detect a marked frustration with families who use more than their 'allotted' episode of intervention and a similar frustration with staff who offer a family a second episode. This also reflects common differences between practitioners and researchers in program evaluation.

It is clear that two years after it was established, the program is facing the challenge of increasing numbers of referrals and an inability to achieve 'efficient throughput' of cases. This is exacerbated by the lack of alternative resources in the area and by referrals from the statutory child protection services which obviously need longer

intervention. There is the ever-present risk of goal displacement in such programs – that what was conceived as a preventive, early intervention service will shift toward the tertiary end of the service spectrum.

The model of evaluation used is a sound one. Questions such as 'Does the program prevent abuse and neglect?' cannot be answered from this type of evaluation and require very large numbers, controlled groups, etc, which are problematic in this field. However, an agency-based evaluation is able to document the characteristics of families and referrers, and assess progress toward case specific goals as perceived by families and the workers or volunteers. Given the short-term focus of the program, it would have been helpful to have known more about the degree to which the gains were sustained after the cessation of service. Another aspect which I am sure other agencies would want to hear more about is how salaried staff and volunteers were able to work together, as elsewhere this has been an obvious source of tensions.

In regard to volunteers, questions such as what is an appropriate level of training and supervision for volunteers in relation to the tasks they carry out is a core issue. Matching what a family wants and what a volunteer is able and willing to offer is a delicate balance, as are the ambiguous norms governing the relationship. Is the

volunteer a 'friend' or a 'worker' and if the former, what does it mean to report back to a supervisor on the family? It would have been good to have had some of these issues explored a little further in the evaluation.

An exciting aspect of the program is its co-location with parish facilities and the Uniting Church Social Justice worker. This provides the potential for a 'communitarian' rather than an 'individualistic' focus in the program, and wonderful opportunities for advocacy and going 'from case to cause'. For example, is the high cost of child care and kindergarten leading to some children being deprived of this opportunity and adding to the pressure on their mothers? While still in its early days, it is to be hoped that these elements become an important part of the program model. Copelen Child & Family Services is to be congratulated on both its innovative program and its evaluation, which will be very useful to others in the field. One hopes that this and similar services secure the funding essential for their survival and continue to reach out to families before they get too close to the edge of the cliff.

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Bullying and what to do about it

Ken Rigby

Australian Council for Educational Research, 1996, Camberwell, 299 pp.

General concern and debate about violence in the Australian community is increasing. The tragic massacre at Port Arthur in 1996 has, for the first time, led to a degree of control over gun ownership. The media, however, tends to report on extreme, stranger perpetrated and non-gendered incidents, rather than on the everyday and familiar (male) assaults. This pattern of reporting narrows the definition of what constitutes violence and renders some of its manifestations invisible. Most people are aware of the issue of violence in schools, either as memories of being victims themselves or as concerned parents of school-aged children. This grave social issue is so commonplace,

generationally persistent and seemingly intractable that it is often discussed with despondent resignation – 'boys will be boys'. And the popular terms for such institutionally based assault – *bullying* or *harassment* – can downplay the seriousness of the problem.

While using the word 'bullying' in his title, Ken Rigby makes it clear from the start that this is a significant social issue than can and must be decisively responded to. Avoiding a common assumption that violence is purely physical, he includes the equally harmful verbal assaults, threats and social exclusion within his definition of bullying.

Using an accessible, non-academic style, the first part of the book is devoted to establishing the characteristics and incidence of violence in schools based on extensive research. Rigby, who surveyed over 8,500 students from a range of primary and secondary schools between 1993 and 1994, found that '... on average we could expect one or two children in each class to encounter quite frequent physical abuse from peers. Being threatened with harm appeared equally prevalent' (1996: 34). The percentage of children experiencing victimisation once a week or more was 19.3% for boys and 15% for girls. It is alarming to think that, in spite of years of educational reform and specialist programs, violence is being