

How can a strengths approach increase safety in a child protection context?

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Child protection is one of the most difficult fields for social welfare professionals to work within. Being an enabler on one hand and an agent of social control on the other, can create a dichotomy that leaves practitioners feeling like they need a different set of skills to do each component. Maybe a strengths approach framework can provide the link between the two. A strengths approach is greater than a set of strengths-based tools. It is a way of conceptualising the organisation and delivery of child protection services. This article expresses the current views of a practitioner with 37 years experience in the child and family welfare field.

Carolyn Cousins' article, 'The "Rule of Optimism": Dilemmas of embracing a strength based approach in child protection work', published in *Children Australia* (Volume 30, No 2, 2005), reflects both the joys and concerns that I frequently hear from professionals who work either within or alongside child protection services. I'm often asked whether a solely strengths-based approach can be safely applied to child protection work. I find it difficult to answer because I am not sure that it is the right question. I'm always tempted to say 'yes', but I feel compelled to check what the enquirer means by a strengths-based approach. Probably for me the question is: how can a strengths-based approach increase safety in a child protection context? Whether it is useful, better or worse than another approach, or insufficient by itself, can then be considered.

The term 'strengths-based' does not tell me much. It tends to have become a catch cry with different meanings to different people. I would like to keep the debate open by sharing where I believe I am at now after many years of practice, reflection and adaptation of seriously optimistic social work. These are simply my ideas. The debate is important. I wholeheartedly agree with Cousins (2005:32) that '... the challenges of unpacking any approach, when carefully considered, can only serve to enhance our work with families'.

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WHAT IS A STRENGTHS APPROACH?

Over time my colleagues and I have moved away from the term 'strengths-based practice', preferring to use the concept of a strengths approach. A strengths approach is not a model of practice; it is a philosophy for working with people: individuals, families, groups, organisations and communities. As McCashen (2004:11) explains, it is a values-based approach for working for change:

It is concerned with people's strengths and aspirations as a means to profound and meaningful change, as opposed to being concerned with problems and what people are doing wrong. In essence it is about the bringing of hope.

It assists people to clarify their concerns but pays most attention to identifying what works and what helps. Then it looks at the risks and considers how to reduce them.

The term 'strengths approach' is used because it is an approach that depends primarily on positive attitudes about people and their potential for change, growth and learning (McCashen 2004:11).

It is not just about work with clients. It is about you and me in our lives too.

It rests on values of social justice, respect for people's dignity, their capacities, rights, uniqueness and commonalities. It is an approach that is based on a set of principles and uses a range of frameworks in a flexible and responsive way to assist learning, growth and change.

The key principles of the strengths approach are:

- Social justice
- Respect
- The sharing of power
- An emphasis on people’s strengths and capacities as a means to change and grow
- Inclusion and collaboration
- Transparency
- Self-determination.

Each of these principles is interdependent and has significant implications. To understand the approach is to understand each principle, what it looks like in practice, and the relationship between them all.

IMPLICATIONS OF A STRENGTHS APPROACH

When the implications of each principle are considered in a child protection context, the interrelatedness becomes very obvious (see Figure 1). Although each principle is important, the context in which they are being considered will determine the relative importance of each. The child’s rights will always be the most important and, at times, self determination by the child or her family may have to be over-ridden by concerns for the child’s safety. On other occasions, the child’s safety will be enhanced by encouraging the child and/or family members to be self determining.

The principles provide a foundation for working with people for change in any context, including child protection. They speak as much about the organisational and community culture needed to underpin the approach as they do about individual professional’s practice choices.

Child protection interventions always need to be considered in the context of community. Protecting children does not start at the point of child protection intervention. It starts with well informed, inclusive communities that celebrate diversity, encourage shared participation, and are responsive to the needs of all children. We will not alleviate abuse or neglect one case at a time.

WHEN CHANGE IS NEEDED

Strengths-based child protection interventions are premised on the assumption that change is needed and that sustainable change is more likely to occur when it builds on what people can already do and what makes sense in their context. Strengths approaches apply tools like solution focused and narrative practices because they build motivation and aspiration while assisting people to find solutions and address patterns that constrain change. Motivated people are learners.

Figure 1: Implication of Principles to Practice

Principle	Practice Implications
Social justice	Ensure children’s rights to be and feel safe and to have access to full developmental opportunities. Approach child protection as a social problem and a community responsibility.
Respect	Ensure each person is heard, including the child. Allow space for different stories and interpretations to emerge. Acknowledge aspirations and effort.
The sharing of power	Name imbalances in power base. Acknowledge different perspectives. Invite responsibility. Explain why concerns are held. Allow the child and family members to determine what resources they need.
An emphasis on people’s strengths and capacities as a means to change and growth	Employ practices that assist people to discover or re-discover their own capacities and consider how they could be applied to building sustainable positive change.
Inclusion and collaboration	Consult widely. Involve family and all significant adults as participants in the child’s safety and well being. Work within systems.
Transparency	Open sharing of information – no secrets. Unless you can argue that harm will be increased, have the client and family present when sharing information about them with other professionals. Clearly explain processes. Name expectations and dangerous behaviours. Ask for feedback.
Self-determination	Accept that sustainable change is primarily the responsibility of parents and primary caregivers. Listen to the child. Look at things from the child and family view point and facilitate their solution finding abilities.

The strengths facilitation process brings hope that people can achieve change. That hope has to be owned by the child and the child’s family, not just by the practitioner. To use one’s strengths and resources you have to first of all know what they are, then know how to select and apply them usefully in any given situation. It is an internal process. It cannot be replaced by professionals and supportive people who identify a person’s strengths for them or identify a range of external environmental strengths. These things can contribute to building safety, but only if the people who need to use them are confident about engaging them. Formal child protection risk assessments balance risk with strengths, but

when conducted on the run by extremely busy practitioners, there is a risk that the strengths are identified by the practitioner and often not 'owned' or understood by the family and therefore are not accessible to them.

An ideal risk assessment clearly identifies and explains protective concerns in a language and format that includes the child and family's input and encourages the family to act responsibly. A child-centred, family friendly, practice framework at times leaves people confused about who the actual client is.

CHILD-CENTRED PRACTICE

Figure 2 represents a system that places the child in its centre. The child is the client. It then depicts the hierarchy of significance of the adults and organisations that sit behind the child. The closer you sit to the child, the more significant the impact of your relationship with the child in both the short and long term. All those behind the child are participants in the child's well-being. The family is no longer a client but a fellow participant. As in any process, roles, responsibilities and accountabilities need to be clearly stated.

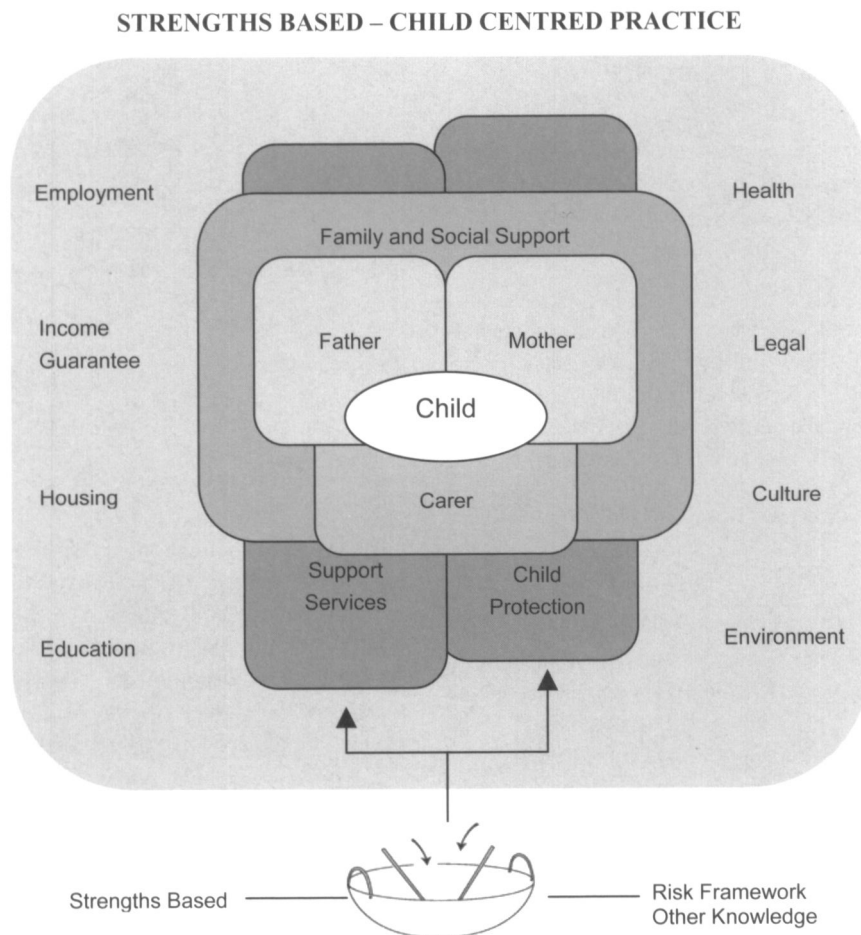
People with different types of power and knowledge come together to build the capacity for safety and well-being. The child protection worker or contracted case manager in a non-government service has a facilitation role in building the capacity of the team. The notion of parents as participants rather than clients has the potential to open up many different ways for them to participate. Hopefully that will allow more men to engage professional support.

Specialist services are added to complement the strengths and resources of those closer to the child, rather than to compensate for or dismiss their skill and responsibility, and hence further the process of marginalisation that in turn increases risk.

A strengths approach provides a structure that encourages people with a shared vision for the child's well-being to work together, adding value to what each can provide. It encourages services to work collaboratively and learn from each other. Territory and ownership seem less important when working towards a common vision for a child rather than when focusing on eliminating deficit.

Figure 2

Adapted from *Shaping the Future* (O'Neil 2004)



Focusing on eliminating deficit risks giving more power to the problem. It tends to equate the person with the problem rather than seeing the person as caught in the problem, overwhelmed by or doing the problem. The latter view invites action to regain power over the problem.

HEARING THE PAIN

Cousins (2005:32) expresses concern about strengths-based practices with their emphasis on moving forward:

There does not appear to be time to acknowledge, give credence to and hear the hurt and pain.

If this were so, then her assumption that strengths-based practices do not sufficiently acknowledge the impact of trauma would be correct. I believe a strengths approach can and, in my preferred style of strengths-based practice, would spend time in the past at the child’s or adult’s invitation. Respectful practice usually demands that we hear the weight of the problem and the effort expended to date to live with, seek solutions and survive the trauma. Good practice is built on relationships, and sharing the pain and joy is part of that. What strengths approaches try to avoid is having the listener also become overwhelmed by the pain. The listener can listen for two stories in the one: the story of trauma and the story of heroism – the alternate story. Strengths practices facilitate the client’s rediscovery of the alternate story. If the client is not ready to hear herself tell that side of the story then we need to listen to the pain for longer. But we listen in a style that gives no more power to the weight of the problem. We listen respectfully but begin to transfer more of the power to the coping ability. With children we often listen through their play.

Once the pain has been acknowledged, the future can be imagined. As Ben Furman says:

It is natural to think that our past has an effect on how our future will turn out, but we rarely look at it the other way around. The future – that is what we think it will bring – determines what our past looks like (Furman1997:81).

Once this new picture of the future is developed, the child and the team of participants can build that future. Part of that will include discovering non-useful and unsafe patterns that need to change. It will also identify structural barriers and potential resources that currently lie outside the control of the child and the family.

COMBINING RELEVANT KNOWLEDGE

There is a wok at the bottom of Figure 2. The wok is a metaphor that describes the relationship between risk assessment, the family’s knowledge, theories of attachment and resilience, and other specialist knowledge. Each child’s situation is unique. The work of the participants in a child’s well-being will be informed by any knowledge relevant to that child. That knowledge metaphorically is combined in the wok but, as with all good wok meals, the ingredients don’t lose their unique characteristic. They do not become blended into a new substance. They add value to each other but each can still be identified and valued. The strengths approach, representing the principles listed earlier in this article, becomes the sauce. They add the flavour or style to the way the knowledge is elicited, combined, enhanced and presented.

Figure 3: Comparison of two paradigms

Fear of Harm	Hope for the Child
Procedural based	Relationship based
Episode driven	Client directed (child focused)
Focus on risk assessment	Focus on sustainable change
Takes over from the family	Encourages families to take responsibility
Power invested in the specialist	Power invested in collaboration
Placements arranged around need for placement	Placements designed around purpose of placement and what it is to achieve
Specialist responsibility	Community based responsibility
Focuses on capacity of child's family	Builds capacity of the child's environment
Attempts to restrict adolescents	Creates opportunities for adolescents
Built on a set of assumptions	Interrogates our assumptions

