Practice perspectives ...

The Family Support Innovation Projects in Victoria
A progress report from Ballarat Family Services

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Ballarat Family Services is the service that has evolved in Ballarat, Victoria as a result of a Department of Human Services initiative, the Family Support Innovation Projects. More than two years after the commencement of the program, Ballarat Family Services is leading a major re-orientation of the service system for families who have borderline involvement with the statutory Child Protection system. This re-orientation involves all parts of the service system, including the nature of the collaborative relationships between non-government agencies and the statutory Child Protection Agency. It has also led to Ballarat Family Services revisiting the nature and purpose of the practice of family support work. This paper will give an overview of the development of Ballarat Family Services and go on to outline the lessons learned in practice, placing them in the context of current theory and research.

PRACTICE AND POLICY BACKGROUND TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FAMILY SUPPORT INNOVATION PROJECTS

The development of the child protection system in Victoria over the past twenty years has been well documented (Markiewicz 1995, pp. 38-40; Stanley & Goddard 2002, pp. 17-23). One of the key conclusions to be drawn from these accounts is that in the early 1990s, Victoria moved away from a family support/child protection system based largely on a range of non-government agencies with a small statutory system. The introduction of mandatory reporting in 1992 shifted the centre of gravity of the system to the statutory Child Protection Service with a doubling of notifications.

The message given to the professional and broader

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community in the early 1990s was that concerns about the welfare of children could only be dealt with by the statutory system through a legalistic process. Community agencies had concerns for the wellbeing of families, but lacked the resources, research and theory base to work with them adequately. Since child protection did not have the legislative mandate to deal with broader 'welfare' concerns, these were not addressed and re-notifications continued to occur as many notifiers to Child Protection did not accept their concerns were being addressed and so continued to report the same or similar issues.

From 2000, Victorian policy changed to reflect concerns about the way the child protection system was heading. Data about the rate of re-notifications reinforced these concerns. The rate of notifications per 1000 children in Victoria grew from 27 in 1996-97 to 32 in 2000-01, with the figures for rural Victoria increasing from 34 per 1000 in 1996-97 to 46 per 1000 in 2000-01. Whilst the number of notifications to Child Protection increased, the number of investigations fell and the number of substantiations remained static. Analysis of local data in a number of local government areas in the State clearly indicated a pattern of consistent notifications of the same children, but no further intervention occurring. This led the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) to conclude that the increase in notifications had been in re-notifications, rather than notifications of new children (Community Care 2002, p.13).

One of the policy directions to come out of this data was an attempt to place more resources and responsibility for working with vulnerable children and families back into the community sector. This goal was in line with research

stressing the need for earlier intervention in the prevention of child abuse (Wise 2001, p. 2). The culmination of this policy development was the establishment of the Family Support Innovation Projects. In 2002, a number of communities experiencing high notification rates were chosen for the initial round of Innovation Projects. These were designed to be family support programs specifically targeted to divert families from the child protection system by improving the community-based support services open to them.

According to the Department of Human Services (DHS),

'The Innovation Projects have the following characteristics:

• They are part of a network of coordinated community-based services, including child protection, family support, health, justice and education.

• They offer a range of low, medium and high intensity services, capable of delivering comprehensive, flexible services that respond to families' needs over the short, medium or long-term.

• Their staff are trained, experienced professionals with a high level of interpersonal skills.

• Their approach to service delivery incorporates these features:

◊ Active engagement with families through assertive outreach.

◊ Capacity to work with families displaying resistance and denial.

◊ A focus on working with parents to address their children's needs.

◊ Sustained, long term enduring support.'
(DHS 2002, p. 1).

This project design reflects the messages from research about family support as the key preventative program of child maltreatment (Tomison 2004, p. 20). Of particular note is the move to a range of interventions available to families in the longer term; previously Departmental policy had discouraged long-term interventions in favour of time limited ones.
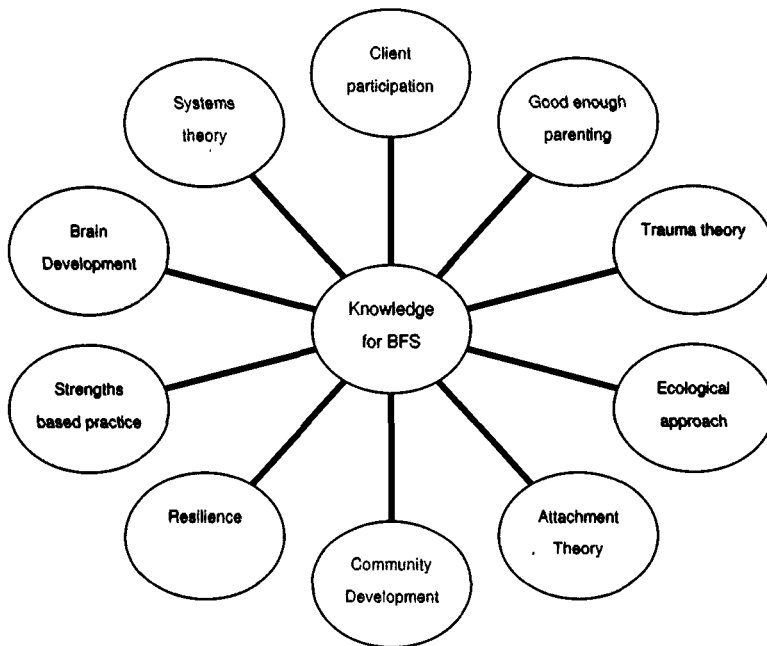
THE BALLARAT PROJECT

The City of Ballarat was one of the communities chosen for an Innovation Project due to the higher than average per capita child notification rate in that city. Ballarat is a regional Victorian city with a population of some 85,000, situated 100kms from Melbourne.

Child and Family Services Ballarat Inc (CAFS) and Centacare, Catholic Diocese of Ballarat Inc, two leading child and family services agencies in Ballarat, formed the Ballarat Family Services consortium together with the City of Ballarat and Ballarat Health Services. Ballarat Family Services offers a continuum of services from early intervention/prevention through to home-based services, therapy, community development, case management and long-term support. The Family Support Innovations Project funding allowed for a doubling of resources available for family support and case management within Ballarat. DHS funding supported innovation by not being prescriptive in the way the service was to be delivered and not setting output targets in terms of numbers of clients seen. Instead, the targets were set in terms of percentage reduction in notifications and re-notifications to Child Protection within the Ballarat LGA (see Table 1).

Ballarat Family Services introduced some of the elements of a community-based response to children's welfare envisioned in DHS policy (Community Care 2002, p. 39) by establishing a centralised intake service, an enhanced family work and case management service and a focus on support in the early years of a child's life. The expanded service commenced in February 2003. Although there was a doubling of resources available to the agencies for this work, at this time it was not envisioned that delivering a differential response would mean a significant change in the way family support was practiced by the agencies. However, it very quickly became clear that for the Project to be sustainable, it would have to concentrate on changing the culture of community-based family services agencies and statutory child protection. It is these changes that form the key lessons from the project over the past two years.

Between February 2003 and June 2005, Ballarat Family Services Intake received 1435 calls and allocated 254 families for case management. Notifications within Ballarat reduced significantly during this period. Ballarat Family Services met the notification and re-notification targets for the first two years of the Project, but not the very high targets of the third year. During the year October 2001 to September 2002, before the Innovation Project commenced, 1424 notifications were received in Ballarat. During the year October 2003 to September 2004, 1228 notifications were received. This represents a 13.8% reduction year on year. Over the same period, notifications statewide reduced by 1.1% (Thomas 2004, p. 8). This data,

Table 1. Notification targets for Ballarat Family Services

	2000-01 Actual	2001-02 Actual	2002-03 Target	2003-04 Target	2004-05 Target
1st time notifications	376	404	389	313	240
Re-notifications	930	925	864	675	582
All notifications	1306	1329	1253	988	822

Figure 1. Underpinning knowledge in Ballarat Family Services

which comes from the statewide evaluation of the first round of Family Support Innovation Projects, suggests the methodology of these Projects in diverting families in need from the Child Protection system was working. The view taken by the evaluation was:

> There is measurable 'significant diversion of families away from Child Protection. There are measurable reductions in re-notifications and progression into the child protection system and there is evidence of improved service capacity for dealing with families who do not come into contact with child protection. In short the program works (Thomas 2004, p. 42).

LESSON 1

FAMILY SUPPORT WORK IS ROCKET SCIENCE

Home visiting family support services have evolved from services provided by volunteers, and have culminated in a method of delivering service that placed emphasis on practice wisdom and practical support, often at the expense of research and theoretical knowledge. The process of working towards change with families is complex and requires a wide range of interconnecting theoretical knowledge and practice wisdom.

Figure 1 outlines the theoretical frameworks currently underpinning the work of practitioners within Ballarat Family Services, adapted from SCARF 2004.

A strengths-based approach is most likely to attract the attention of family members in identifying and motivating towards change (Tomison 2004, p. 28). Family work is about coming to an assessment of the range of individual

needs within a family structure. The assessment process needs to be structured using an understanding of the principles of family therapy and ecological theory (Garbarino & Ganzel 2000, p. 76; Gelles 1999, p. 14; Jack 2001, p. 54; Milner& Crouch 1999, p. 36; Worden 2003, pp. 162-163). Workers also need to have an understanding of structural issues underlying such issues as poverty, and how these impact at every level of a family's life (Haralambos et al. 1997, pp. 306-312).

As family work has been criticised for a lack of focus on the individual needs of children whilst focusing on the needs of adults (Tomison 2004, p. 28), an assessment framework (see Lesson 3 below) is one way of placing the appropriate focus on the needs of children. Workers require the capability to understand and assess the basic nature of attachment relationships between children and parents, and how this is affected by experiences of trauma, particularly complex trauma, and deprivation for both adults and children (Shonkoff 2000, pp. 3-4; Zeanah et al. 1997, pp. 183-85). Dealing with the complex issues of families also requires an understanding of the complexity of human development, particularly contemporary research into brain development (Shonkoff & Marshall 2000, pp. 35-36).

In understanding what motivates people to change, family workers have to be aware of the impacts on functioning of specific issues such as intellectual disability, psychiatric illness and drug and alcohol abuse. Beyond this, the family worker needs to understand how the roots of problematic behaviour often lie in past experiences of trauma and how the process of working towards change can trigger reactions based in these experiences.

The key to successful family work lies in the ability of the workers to negotiate a helping relationship with families (Egan 2002, p. 42). The desirable characteristics of a worker identified by family members include genuineness, openness and honesty (Clark 2005, p. 17). Workers act as a bridge between the world of the families and the world of the welfare system and contemporary theoretical knowledge. They need to be comfortable in both worlds. Whilst it is possible to provide training and support to give workers the theoretical knowledge described above, it is much more difficult to develop within workers the kinds of values and orientation needed to connect with families and provide the 'bridge'. Family work is very complex and the need for workers to be assisted to integrate theoretical practice models with their own life and practice experience is a vital learning of Ballarat Family Services.

LESSON 2

CASE MANAGEMENT IS BEST BUILT AROUND A FRAMEWORK

Over the years, family workers in a range of agencies have built up an impressive tool kit of methods for working with families who are experiencing substantial difficulties. These families usually have a range of difficulties including transient and chaotic lifestyles, family violence and entrenched conflict, drug and alcohol abuse, individual backgrounds of deprivation, poverty and abuse, poor social skills and few or no connections to the broader community (Community Care 2002, p. 46). Family support agencies have always worked with these families and have developed a number of appropriately integrated approaches. These include competency or strengths-based assessments to engage with families on their own terms; case management and case conferences to marshal resources and review progress; practical in-home support to improve skills; and group work and community development approaches to decrease social isolation. However, the case management tool box lacked an overarching framework and, as a result, practice with families tended to be reactive and driven by crisis. Workers easily lost track of goals and were unable to lead the families towards significant change. What appeared to be lacking was the capacity for both workers and families to hold in mind the 'big picture' of the family's needs, whilst at the same time containing the day-to-day crises. The Victorian system had focussed for some time on risk assessment (Tomison 2004, pp. 50-51) and, while this was an important start, this approach had it limitations and did not give the big picture required. Risk assessment tended to be used as a method to exclude families from service because they did not meet the risk threshold. Families would then come back into the system when experiencing greater adversity.

Comprehensive frameworks such as the UK *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (UK Department of Health 2000) and the *North Carolina Family Assessment Scale* (Reed-Ashcraft, Kirk & Fraser 2001) have been used to form the basis of the case management practices of Ballarat Family Services. These frameworks deal with some of the criticisms that family support work relies too much on engagement with parents and ignores direct engagement with, and assessment of, children (Tomison 2004, p. 27). By taking an ecological approach, and using these frameworks, the practitioner is led towards dealing with a range of dimensions of a family's life, including the needs of individual children. Figure 2 illustrates the approach used in both the Children in Need framework and its Australian adaptation - Supporting Children and Responding to Families (SCARF) (Fernandez & Romeo 2003).

Figure 2.

(Department of Health [UK] 2000, p.17; SCARF)

In introducing a comprehensive framework, Ballarat Family services concentrated on two areas:

- improving the skill base, support and professional self-confidence of the family workers;

- developing a shared understanding, within the local service system, of the nature of the framework and how it could be used.

LESSON 3

AUTHORITY IS NOT A DIRTY WORD

The issue of the use of authority in family support interventions has not been well explored. For many workers the only type of authority they could identify was the statutory authority used by Child Protection. This led to workers feeling powerless and frustrated as they felt they had no capacity or mandate to initiate change within either families or service systems.

Although authority drawn from the statutory child protection system is a valid source, there are a number of other sources of authority that can clearly be identified in the work of family workers:

Authority of knowledge
Family workers have authority because they possess specialised skills and families expect them to use their knowledge and expertise to provide assistance, though sometimes this knowledge can challenge the ideas of the parents and may lead to conflict.

Authority of relationship
This is marked by openness, transparency and accountability which leads to trust between the people involved. As family members develop trust in their worker, they come to value

the relationship and will therefore often follow directions and implement changes when requested, even if they initially do not agree with these changes, to ensure the relationship continues.

Authority of community

Families with strong, informal, support systems and strong links to the broader community deal differently with problems than do families without these links. When in difficulty, families with strong support systems have a range of options and strategies. We have yet to truly tap the potential in mobilising communities to work for change within families who initially lack these links.

Workers who are able to act with authority in their interventions with families will be able to bring together the resources needed for change, including the preparedness of the family members to involve themselves in the process. This is less about using power to force a change than using persuasion to move families in a particular direction. The key considerations in this process are time; acknowledgement by the worker of the power differential inherent in the relationship; the preparedness of the worker to stay involved with the family over a long period and to take advantage of whatever small changes the family is making.

Case planning is important as the worker and family must be clear about what they are attempting to achieve together. The worker must be able to identify issues of concern with the family and come to an agreement as to how best deal with these. It is remarkable how few people working with families are willing to broach 'difficult' issues that are perceived as likely to lead them into conflict with parents. Parents often expect these to be the issues the workers will raise and are puzzled when they do not.

The concept of authority cannot be limited to the interactions with families (Scott 2005, p. 133). By becoming involved with a broad range of community agencies such as schools, pre-schools and child care centres, family work is increasingly seen as a recognisable community service. This increased involvement in the broader community has a number of effects:

• involvement with a family services agency becomes more acceptable and less stigmatising for families;

• family workers become more visible in the service system, they are more available to be consulted and their skills and insights become more recognised and valued;

• a broader range of points of contact between the family services agency and the wider community develop with greater opportunities for group work and for joint projects between agency workers and community members. An example of this process is the recruitment of volunteer mentors to work with at-risk young people.

LESSON 4

FLEXIBLE, INNOVATIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE STATUTORY SYSTEM ARE POSSIBLE – THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY-BASED CHILD PROTECTION WORKER

The Family Support Innovations Projects reflect the beginning of a shift in direction of the broader Victorian child welfare system from a child protection to a child welfare orientation. The child protection orientation has been defined by Spratt (2001) as:

> ... characterized by a primary concern to protect children from abuse, usually from parents who are often considered morally flawed and legally culpable ...

The family service orientation is contrasted as:

> ... characterized by a tendency to understand acts, or circumstances, thought harmful to children, in the context of psychological or social difficulties experienced by families (Spratt 2001, p. 934).

Workers act as a bridge between the world of the families and the world of the welfare system and contemporary theoretical knowledge. They need to be comfortable in both worlds.

The introduction of the Family Support Innovation Projects was not accompanied by any legislative change. Although this makes sense in that the Projects were pilots to test out new ideas, this meant differential responses had to be introduced into the existing legislative framework that did not easily cater for them. The key issue was that the legal protections which enabled agencies to share information about families and work in a child's best interest were seen as predicated on the making of a notification. In Victoria, notifications are defined by the person making the call; in other words, any contact with Child Protection where the family is identified is regarded as a notification.

Ballarat Family Services developed a centralised intake system to take referrals about families where there were concerns about family functioning, but where issues of risk were not as clear cut or obvious. In effect, the centralised intake was built 'in front' of the child protection intake system. The role of centralised intake was to perform a careful initial needs assessment and to make suggestions for further action. Although the intake workers were experienced and skilled practitioners, a method had to be developed to ensure that the statutory child protection

agency was able to be consulted about the decisions being made at the point of intake.

The role of the Community Based Child Protection Worker (CBCPW) was developed in the statutory Child Protection system to assist Innovation Projects in this area. The initial functions of the CBCPW were clear:

- to provide consultation and advice to family services workers, which could include joint outreach visits with either new or existing clients, attendance at case conferences and being available on site to consult with family services workers working with high risk welfare concerns;

- to undertake a range of existing child protection functions in relation to family services clients. These included taking notifications from Family Workers and processing these when the need arose, being involved in initial investigations and protective interventions, and keeping family services informed of these processes;

- to enhance the relationship between child protection and family services workers and support their joint work with families where issues of significant harm were present.

The consultation and advice role of the CBCPW was greatly limited by the current legislation. To ensure compliance with the legislation, any advice or consultation about a family between family services and the CBCPW had to be either with the knowledge and consent of the family, or conducted in a de-identified manner. A much more transparent practice with families developed as a result of these limitations, as workers were encouraged to share their concerns with families, rather than going directly to child protection. The CBCPW role was vital in proving that the decisions made by family services workers were in line with decisions that would be made by child protection workers in similar circumstances. This was important for both the development of the individual family services workers and for the acceptance of the system by the broader service network.

There was some thought in the early development of the project that the demand for the CBCPW role would reduce over time and that individual workers would develop the confidence to make decisions about risk. Over the last two years, family services workers have developed a better understating of the tools DHS use to assess risk and to make their own judgments around when a family's situation has progressed to notification stage. In this sense, the role of the CBCPW has reduced. Our experience has been that when cases progress beyond the notification stage and into the investigation, court and protective intervention stages, there are myriad complexities through which the CBCPW is involved in supporting family services workers and families. In fact, the managing of clients where both Child Protection and Family Services are involved is more complex once a

case progresses beyond investigation. This has the CBCPW working as part of a team, contributing their knowledge and expertise in risk assessment and the use of the statutory system to achieve change.

> *The major 'innovation' of the Family Support Innovation Project in Ballarat has been the development in understanding of the nature and capabilities of family support, leading to a more coherent, cohesive and child-focused service to families in need.*

As the Projects demonstrated success over time, the Victorian Government announced that the review of the Child Protection Legislation would include the experiences of the Family Support Innovations Projects. This new legislation was passed through Parliament in 2006 as the Child, Youth and Families Act and it does indeed reflect many of the experiences of the Family Support Innovations Projects. The legislation clearly states the role of community agencies in earlier intervention to protect children and allows for much more of a joint approach between community agencies and statutory child protection. The ongoing role of the Community Based Child Protection Workers within the system is assured, although there continues to be a great deal of developmental work to be done with this role.

CONCLUSION

Ballarat Family Services has had a significant effect in reducing the demand on Child Protection from families in need. The question still to be answered by research is the extent to which the changes introduced by Ballarat Family Services are improving the situations of families and, in particular, reducing the level of chronic harm experienced by children.

The major 'innovation' of the Family Support Innovation Project in Ballarat has been the development in understanding of the nature and capabilities of family support, leading to a more coherent, cohesive and child-focused service to families in need. The service will continue to develop in improving its capacity to provide therapeutic support to families, whilst, at another level, the service will be improving the links between the broader community and families in need. ■

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Electronic Resources

SCARF *Supporting Children and Responding to Families*, Barnardos NSW, <www.scarf.org.au>.

NCFAS North Carolina Family Assessment Scale National Family Preservation Network <http://www.nfpn.org/preservation/assessment_tool.php>

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