

Social Policy Series
Government and Human Relations
The importance of relationships in formal service systems.
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Thank you for the invitation to participate in today's forum. As noted on the agenda, my task is to provide "comment from the field". In that capacity, as a member of the field, I am offering a comment – my comment – influenced very much by the perspective of a community based agency with a long history of working in and through the community to developing our current model of Community Caring.

Our purpose as a community agency working with at risk families, children and youth, is to create the understanding and momentum which will deliver the resources and opportunities vulnerable families need to change their circumstances. The focus on resources and opportunities is a blend of international research with local practice experience. The common theme is the central role of community. Community is identified as the place through which we need to work, that is where people live, in order to deliver short term and long term, intergenerational change. A focus on community also means we need to maximise all contributions, from the informal neighbourhood networks through to government and business.

As service providers we need to be clear about the legacy of our interventions. When we become involved in the lives of people, do we leave their relationships and networks strengthened, unchanged or depleted? In conversations with families and young people, we need to know who they can call for advice or help in the middle of the night or over the weekend. Whilst making sure they have access to help lines and crisis numbers, these are no substitute for real people who will come to their door, support them, and care whether or not they are OK.

When I listened to the media coverage of the recent tragedy of the little girl who died alone in the flat beside the body of her mother it seemed to me we were witnessing a second level of tragedy; the neighbours who noticed bedroom lights on all night but did not feel able to knock on the door; the neighbours who knew enough to know that something was different but did not feel compelled or empowered to take action.

I was left wondering if this is part of a broader cultural issue (mind your own business) but also an unintended legacy of moving to a formal, mandatory reporting, government Child Protection system. When a child is vulnerable or at risk, as a community do we now expect the formal system to be activated and “do something” rather than the neighbours to get involved and offer support? (We have much to learn here from indigenous cultures and the priority placed on kinship systems and shared community responsibilities.)

I found it regrettable that other service providers offered comment about the “inadequacy of the voluntary services” and called for more child protection workers. Which service, government or non government was going to be there in the middle of the night to see that the lights were on? When I think of many of the families we are working with, they certainly have profiles that include all the indicators for “risk of child abuse and neglect”. In our housing estate programs in Brighton, Sandringham, Hampton and Highett we have a number of mothers who have experienced family violence, have substance abuse issues, are isolated with no family supports, have been previously reported to child protection, and give us ongoing cause for concern. We are not there in the middle of the night when they get into crisis. These mothers love their children but we know they are never off the “at risk’ radar and there have already been three child deaths on this group of estates this year. As part of the formal service system, what can we do other than yet another report to child protection? Is child removal and out-of-home care the best option we can offer?

Just last week one of these very mums in our area took an overdose. She was on her own in her walk up flat with her 9 month old. She already has two children in foster care. The state funded high risk infant program (PASD) has been involved. We all know that when not drug affected, she is a competent and capable parent. The formal intervention has confirmed that, but after 12 weeks intensive support, what was the legacy of the formal intervention for supporting and sustaining relationships for this child and mother?

For the past 10 months, Southern Family Life has been struggling to build connections between a group of isolated mums on this estate. And when I say struggling, I mean struggling. The very environment of walk up flats for mums and babies and prams is a major barrier to even leaving their flats and doing the shopping. Through a local business we have had employees donating nappies and baby formula. A local church and Rotary have been buying us food vouchers. And the Federal Stronger Families program is funding our Creating Capable Communities initiative. So we have had workers, at the estate in the Community flat on a fortnightly basis, offering free lunches and practical assistance, knocking on doors and trying to get these mums together and to the level of engagement to run the Creating Capable Kids parenting program. We are just at the point of feeling this fortnightly contact is so inadequate for building connections between the residents that we wonder if we should consolidate our activity to just two estates.

When our mum overdosed, she picked up the phone and called the mum downstairs and she called the ambulance and took care of the baby. We still have safety issues to resolve, but we also possibly have a local support network forming.

Through the Creating Capable Kids program we have brought a number of parents together on the other estates. When one mum failed to visit her children

in foster care, she was challenged by the African mums who told her being a mother was more important than her new boyfriend (who had been told he was not allowed to visit with the children). They offered to help her make sure she visited the children the next weekend.

When another mum was too drug affected to remember it was her 4 year olds birthday recently, other parents from the Homework Club planned a community birthday party in the playground.

At a recent community barbeque we had over 80 participants with a local Rotary, the community radio station, and a number of businesses donating prizes for games and activities. When we kept drawing raffle tickets to give away the left over sausages and bread, we learnt something really important about helping people to see themselves as winners. The staff of Southern Family Life attended with members or their own families, particularly our children to participate in and help run activities. One of my daughters worked with another staff member's daughter to provide face painting for the children (and some mothers!). Feedback from residents included comment that they had never thought of service providers as parents before and how much they enjoyed the event.

So back to our original question for today. How can formal services be supportive and sustaining of relationships?

Peter Drucker, regarded as the father of modern management who has a particular commitment to the not for profit sector, wrote in 2000

"The 21st century will be the century of the social sector organization. The more economy, money, and information become global, the more community will matter. And only the social sector nonprofit organization performs in the community, exploits its opportunities, mobilizes its local resources, solves its problems. The leadership, competence, and management of the social sector

nonprofit organization will thus largely determine the values, the vision, the cohesion, and the performance of the 21st century society."

The formal system has many opportunities to strengthen the informal networks and neighbourhoods at the local level which provide the opportunities and resources that any family needs to change their circumstances.

Joseph Michalski writes that "the 'community' represents the most natural place for the various sectors to engage one another, where public and private interests intersect, and where long term strategies of healthy human development are likely to have the greatest degree of success." And after a most comprehensive analysis of the research and professional literature Michalski concludes that what we need is Community Centred Family Services which work across clinical research and community development. "Working with clients or consumers to engage in repairing the damage in their lives and building upon their existing strengths and assets should be accompanied by a parallel process of stimulating their thinking about what changes in their broader environments might enhance their well being." Michalski also argues that with this information in mind, the helping professionals can be "engaging actors and systems beyond the immediate individual and his or her family environment". Helpers can seek partners in the community to meet current needs in the short term and strengthen the resources and opportunities for well being for the long term. Services need to adopt an approach of being "a bridge between active community development and therapeutic interventions and used to connect both endeavours".

Dunst (1994), calls such work 'empowerment' with his research demonstrating that when the empowerment philosophy and principles are translated into service delivery, "unempowered families from very poor backgrounds with limited resources gained the ability to mobilize social support networks to meet their needs". Working from a strengths perspective, Dunst argues that when families in difficulty experience an empowering service process they have "opportunities

to use existing capabilities as well as learn new competencies” (1994: 17) Daro identified the same outcomes from her longitudinal study of family programs, identifying the need to develop peoples skills for using services as a critical factor for preventing child abuse and neglect.

Dunst also argues for a social systems model of Family Support which, like the other research referred to, highlights the significance of the context in which families exist (both the people and systems) for making change possible. And his first principle is “Enhancing a sense of community” which emphasises efforts which “promote the coming together of people around shared values and the pursuit of a common cause ... where people concern themselves with the well being of all people and not just those who are most needy or hold some special status”. (p 37) The goal is to promote strong communities which in turn “increase the needed supports and resources and enrich the community environment for families and their members.”

From my perspective the research messages call for a clear a focus on developing consumer skills and resources and opportunities in the community as the most effective means for assisting families to change their circumstances.

When formal services need to intervene in the lives of people there is much we can do strengthen our practice and approaches to ensure this intervention leads to empowering change.

The government is to be commended on recent work to build partnerships with the community sector and explore new ways of working with vulnerable families. I hope that this opportunity includes a focus on building the responsibility and contribution of the broader community and neighbourhood networks, not just more professionals intervening in families. In the US after an initial reduction in foster care by introducing placement prevention programs, they are yet again in crisis with over 500,000 children once again in foster care, entering at a younger

age and experiencing multiple placement disruptions. Without a parallel focus on the social and community conditions which lead to foster care, these initiatives have largely failed. Individual interventions without the community and contextual change may only deliver short term rather than sustainable outcomes.

The Wingspread conference of the Child Welfare League of America in 2000 has joined the call for “good family practice’ to achieve long term, enduring outcomes and community based programming ... (with) changes in practice to meet the needs of families and communities”.

If we want the formal service system to work in such a way that we are supportive and sustaining of relationships, then we need to work with and through the community context. We must not allow the system to be an alternative to community responsibility and encouraging people to get involved to build a culture of neighbourhood community caring.

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