

Advancing the Visibility of the Child in Adult and Child and Family Services

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Abstract

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children promotes the view that to better serve Australia's children all services, communities and individuals need to work together: 'Protecting Children is Everyone's Business'. The Australian Centre for Child Protection conducted a major workforce development initiative, Protecting and Nurturing Children: Building Capacity, Building Bridges, to enhance the capacity of practitioners from a diverse range of services, both child- and family- and adult-focused, to work purposefully with the parents of vulnerable children to prevent child abuse and neglect. This initiative also aimed to build effective connections and support collaboration between adult-focused and child- and family-focused services at both local and strategic levels. By reflecting on the learnings gained from the Building Capacity, Building Bridges initiative, this paper discusses why such an initiative is necessary and identifies some the barriers to achieving the changes called for by the Framework.

Keywords: Adult-focused services Collaboration, Child protection, National Framework for Protecting, Australia's Children, Public health

Introduction

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 'Protecting Australia's Children is Everyone's Business' (Council of Australian Governments, [COAG], 2009) is a foundational direction-setting document for child protection policy and practice. It developed out of awareness that for state and territory governments child protection is a 'wicked problem'; one that requires the adoption of a fundamentally different approach (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth [ARACY], 2009). The National Framework was driven by the Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children; a coalition of non-government organisations and academics and was endorsed by the federal and all state/territory governments. The Framework espouses a public health approach (see Hunter, 2011) that calls for greater involvement of a range of

professionals and others to enhance the variety of systems that are available to protect children (COAG, 2009).

The move towards a public health model of child protection requires more than the traditional statutory response. The central message of the Framework is that ‘child protection is everyone’s business’. This means that adult-focused, and child- and family-focused services need to be more involved in the prevention (and early intervention) of child abuse and neglect. The Framework states that “Australia needs to move from seeing ‘protecting children’ merely as a response to abuse and neglect to one of promoting the safety and wellbeing of children” (COAG, 2009, p.7). This article outlines some of the limitations associated with the current statutory system and discusses efforts being made to engage a greater range of services at an earlier stage in the lives of vulnerable children.

The Australian Centre for Child Protection was funded as part of the first three-year action plan emanating from the Framework to undertake the Protecting and Nurturing Children: Building Capacity, Building Bridges initiative. This initiative aimed to increase both the capacity of services to support the parental roles and responsibilities of their clients, and to increase the capacity for services to work together to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families. However, there are a range of barriers to increasing the willingness and capacity of adult-focused services and specialist services to engage in prevention and early intervention of child abuse and neglect. These will be discussed through a focus on the Protecting and Nurturing Children: Building Capacity, Building Bridges (BCBB) initiative.

Why Do Things Need to Change?

Increasing Numbers of Notifications

Statutory child protection systems are receiving increasing numbers of notifications. There are multiple reasons for this, including that the definition of what constitutes child abuse and neglect has been broadened in response to increasing knowledge and changes in social norms over the years. This has had a major impact on the rates of notification. For example, emotional maltreatment now accounts for a large portion of the notifications received (AIHW, 2013). Mandatory reporting legislation is also partly responsible for a rise in notifications. Mandatory reporting was introduced for severe physical abuse at a time when child abuse and neglect was believed to be less prevalent and the impacts of abuse and neglect were less understood. Many current commentators believe that mandatory reporting, although historically a valid policy, has lost its usefulness to the child protection system and has become counterproductive (Lonne et al., 2008 as cited in Higgins & Katz, 2008) arguing these changes have resulted in drawing

more children and families into the statutory net, exposing them to child protection investigations without necessarily increasing service provision to meet their needs (AIHW, 1999 as cited in O'Donnell, Scott & Stanley, 2008). As the numbers of notifications have increased, the capacity of the statutory system to respond to these has been diminished. Currently the bulk of available resources are being spent on investigation rather than used to support families at risk (Higgins & Katz, 2008). The Framework calls for collective action by stating that statutory child protection services cannot provide a response to all vulnerable children and families and must be able to focus on responding to severe child abuse and neglect.

Families for Whom a Statutory Response May Not be the Most Helpful

Statutory child protection may be the first point of contact with services for families who are at risk (ARACY, 2009, p.54; Jeffreys, Hirte, Rogers & Wilson, 2009, p. 40). The statutory system may nevertheless be ill-equipped to meet their needs and be unable to provide the most appropriate response. It is necessary for these families to receive the support they require before concerns escalate and a statutory child protection intervention is necessary.

It is suggested that a large number of families are being notified to child protection systems because of genuine concerns for the wellbeing of the child. For many people concerned about a child or family, their first and perhaps only response is to make a report to child protection services. The majority of cases that are being notified are children in vulnerable families in which there is a risk from chronic adverse family circumstances and not necessarily from a specific episode of harm. Higgins and Katz (2008) propose that the majority of families who are notified to the child protection system may not meet the criteria for child protection intervention but nonetheless have significant support needs. If these notifications do not reach the risk threshold, intervention may not be offered, meaning families fall through the gaps and receive no response. Bromfield, Gillingham and Higgins (2007) state that “(statutory) child protection has limited capacity to intervene to protect children experiencing low to moderate severity, chronic child maltreatment” (p.42). To help these families, intervention aimed at alleviating the familial factors which are known to increase the risk of child abuse and neglect may be useful. Early intervention is advocated as a means of reducing risk factors and bolstering protective factors to prevent or minimise the consequences of the family circumstances which bring families to the attention of child protection systems (Stern, 2002; Jeffreys, Rogers & Hirte, 2011).

Adult problems are significantly associated with child abuse and neglect and it is necessary for practitioners to recognise and support the parental roles and responsibilities that their clients may present with. Previous research has shown that adult issues such as domestic

violence (Holt, Buckley & Whelan, 2008), alcohol and substance misuse (Dawe et al., 2007; Jeffreys et al., 2009), mental illness (Huntsman, 2008; Jeffreys et al., 2011) and homelessness (Moore, McArthur & Noble-Carr, 2011) among others, can impact upon the parent-child relationship and have a number of negative impacts including increasing the risk of child maltreatment. These adult issues can compromise the parent's capacity to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children (Bromfield, Lamont, Parker & Horsfall, 2010).

Further, such adult problems can be significantly associated with children's entry into care. Jeffreys and colleagues (2009) found that substance misuse is associated with children's entry into care in approximately 70% of cases in South Australia. Similarly, Gibson and Johnstone (2009) suggested that there may be overlap in the families seen by homelessness and child protection service systems. In expanding child protection systems, O'Donnell and colleagues (2008) write that the challenge for adult-focused services is to broaden their focus to include the wellbeing of the child as well as to support the parent.

Bringing Adult-Focused and Child- and Family-Focused Services Together:

Why is it Important?

There is increasing evidence that a lack of collaboration between services can be unhelpful to both children and parents. Researchers have suggested that involvement with a large number of different services can be overwhelming for families at times of crisis. Alakus (as cited in Jeffreys et al., 2011) proposes that services are "inflicted" upon people during a crisis while long-term, flexible and empowering support and service provision could be more effective. The failure of services to work together can have devastating consequences. There have been multiple Australian State and Territory inquiries into child protection systems as well as reports on child deaths that have pointed to the failure of collaboration between services limiting their ability to prevent or minimise harm (NSW Ombudsman, 2014; Wood, 2008). Similar findings are reported internationally with Ofsted (2008 as cited in Arney, Lange & Zufferey, 2010) reporting that "an important finding when serious case reviews have been undertaken after children have been injured or killed is that no single agency had a complete picture of the family or the risk factors". The serious consequences that can arise from a failure to share relevant information between services highlight the need for improved collaboration to prevent child abuse and neglect.

To address the complex problem of child abuse and neglect, it is necessary for all human services to:

1. Recognise the impact of adult problems on children and;
2. Work together to address these complex adult problems in ways that limit their negative impacts on children.

The next section discusses some of the efforts taken to achieve this broader focus to prevent (or ameliorate the impact of) child abuse and neglect. It highlights the obstacles faced in doing so by considering the experience of the Protecting and Nurturing Children: BCBB initiative.

Protecting and Nurturing Children: Building Capacity, Building Bridges Initiative

The BCBB initiative is a national workforce development initiative conducted by the Australian Centre for Child Protection in partnership with 12 Communities for Children (CFC) sites across Australia. BCBB aimed to enhance the capacity (Building Capacity) of diverse practitioners to work purposefully with the parents of vulnerable children. Also in the interests of children, it aimed to build effective connections (Building Bridges) between adult-focused and child- and family-focused services at both local and strategic levels. The key focus of the BCBB initiative was to improve outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs, regardless of whether these families present to an adult specialist service or a child and family service.

The initiative used multiple strategies to build relationships with relevant people and services in each of the locations in which the 12 Communities for Children partners operated. Time was invested in developing an understanding of the key issues and service dynamics in each area so as to harness local support and energy to do better for children. Gatherings of those interested in collaborating to plan and progress agreed local outcomes for children were supported throughout the initiative. In each location these gatherings frequently included staff from the Communities for Children, the child protection agency, schools, health and homelessness services amongst others. The relationships developed during this period provided a sound base for the development and trialling of a workshop about child- and family-sensitive practice. The workshop contained core material about the impacts of adult issues on children, the need for different approaches and opportunities to learn about each other's services. Local input grounded this workshop by using relevant content relating to pertinent issues while maintaining a focus on experiential learning to allow people to practice unfamiliar approaches such as child- and family-sensitive practice.

The initiative was guided by a steering committee made up of members representing the adult issues that present risks to children i.e. domestic/family violence, mental illness, alcohol and other drugs, homelessness; as well as academics and Indigenous advocates.

Two key activities of this initiative were:

1. Collaboration workshops.

In partnership with Communities for Children sites, representatives from adult-focused and child- and family-focused services were invited to a facilitated day-long workshop in their community. The workshop aimed to bring managers from adult-focused and child- and family-focused services together, to develop a shared language, and to begin to identify and consider potential local collaboration.

2. Child- and family-sensitive practice workshops

Practitioners from a wide range of services including family support, education, alcohol and other drug, mental health and domestic violence participated in the child- and family-sensitive practice workshops held across Australia, with approximately 2,000 people from 250 different organisations taking part in the workshops. Nearly half of the participants provided feedback about the workshop content and told us about their experience (Australian Centre for Child Protection, 2014).

The local collaboration workshops sponsored by BCBB introduced the Winkworth and White model of collaboration (Winkworth & White, 2010). A range of factors have been proposed as enablers of greater collaboration between adult-focused services and child- and family-focused services. Winkworth and White (2010) sum up three necessary conditions as:

- What may be done (authority) e.g. The Framework provides the authorising environment;
- What should be done (public value) e.g. evidence of why collaboration is needed for example, while multiple services are involved with vulnerable families children still die; and,
- What can be done (capability) e.g. evidence of what is needed to support and promote collaboration between services, such as the capacity to understand each position and the skills and knowledge required to improve the lives of vulnerable children.

The National Framework Provides an Authorising Environment for Collaboration (What May be Done)

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children provides the authorisation at a policy level to support greater collaboration between services. One of the central principles of the Framework is that responsibility for keeping children safe does not rest with a single agency, but is shared among families and communities, and government and non-government agencies. The Framework provides an authorising environment for adult-focused services to 'join' with child- and family-focused services to better address the often multiple and complex needs that families present, focusing attention on the particular needs of children at an early stage in the intervention. However, the Framework alone is not sufficient to enact change; it has to be performed by 'actors', primarily agencies and workers. Enabling the actors to perform this takes more than the provision of a document. The initial collaboration workshops were a vehicle to introduce the Framework as an authorising environment to promote local collaborations between diverse services to support children's wellbeing. The Australian Centre for Child Protection through the BCBB initiative, distributed hundreds of copies of the Framework at meetings with agency managers and to the participants of the child- and family-sensitive practice workshops held around the country

Importance of a Shared Vision (What Should be Done)

The Framework provides a national policy direction to build the capacity of universal and targeted child and family services, and of the adult specialist sectors, to deliver child- and family-sensitive services and to build bridges between them so that risk factors for child abuse and neglect can be reduced and protective factors enhanced.

A shared vision is an important facilitator of greater collaboration and can enhance collaboration and coordination between services and agencies (ARACY, 2009). Hayes and Higgins (2014) state that "collective awareness of the issues involved and common narratives are the starting point for better coordinated approaches to promoting the resilience of individuals and the wellbeing of their families" (p. 303). All activities under the National Framework aim to achieve the goal that: Australia's children and young people are safe and well. The Framework itself resulted from the development of a vision for children shared by all state and territory governments, the federal government and a coalition of non-government agencies. Discussing the Framework with participants allowed people to better understand the

approach being promoted: that child protection is everyone's business and that enhanced collaboration between services is necessary to prevent child abuse and neglect. Most participants at the child- and family-sensitive practice workshops agreed that working collaboratively with diverse service providers is necessary to address the needs of vulnerable children; recognising that working together is just the first step.

Building Skills and Confidence (What Can be Done)

To increase the capability of the human services workforce to prevent child abuse and neglect takes more than an authorising environment and a shared vision. The members of the workforce also need to have the requisite knowledge, skills and confidence to make a difference to the families where children are at risk. One aim of the BCBB initiative was to foster shared responsibility for protecting children across the human services sector. It was felt that such responsibility could be developed through the process of acquiring particular skills, knowledge and confidence. The child- and family-sensitive practice workshops provided a forum for the development of the skills, knowledge and confidence useful for talking with parents about the impacts of adult problems on their children.

Key to the success of the BCBB sponsored workshops (both collaboration and child- and family-sensitive practice) was attendance and participation by representatives from a mix of adult-focused and child- and family-focused services. These workshops provided opportunities for practitioners from varied services to reflect on what skills and other supports are needed for effective collaboration to occur. Each workshop was developed in consultation with Communities for Children partners, child protection authorities and local agencies with a great deal of pre-planning. Most were held over two days, with a mix of attendees from child- and family-focused and adult-focused services from health, education, homelessness, family support, alcohol and other drug, mental health and domestic violence fields. Key workers from agencies who had initiated a child and family focus were invited to co-present, enabling participants in the training to hear from those in the community who could support practice change.

The use of case studies in the child- and family-sensitive practice workshop enabled participants to explore together what skills and knowledge they each bring to a particular situation. The opportunities created by this experience allowed different skills to be recognised, individual practice approaches to be reflected on, ideas to be shared, and new skills to be developed. These opportunities for working together were favourably commented on by participants.

The workshop provided various materials, access to the COPMI e-learning module, Child Aware Supervision and many readings and case studies appropriate for working with the vulnerable families. It provided a vehicle to bring recent knowledge gained from research into the practice arena in a much more rapid manner than via circulation of a publication.

Quotes from participants in the workshops:

Found it particularly helpful in expanding my ‘counselling’ skills – the way to word conversations with parents to try to engage families and address issues like the scenarios was helpful.

I found the workshop interesting in its focus on children but have learnt most about engaging parents and challenging them to think about how their issues affect their parenting/children.

Support from senior and middle managers is essential for putting policies into practice as these individuals make decisions regarding case loads, resource allocation, and training and supervision requirements (Reupert & Maybery, 2008; Tilbury, Walsh & Osmond, 2012). Managers, coordinators and senior managers were invited to the collaboration workshops to help create an authorising environment at agency level. The involvement was important because insufficient resources and time to attend to children’s needs, and insufficient support and supervision have been identified as major barriers to adult-focused services recognising and addressing the needs of children (Maybery & Reupert, 2009).

Some of the difficulties preventing workshop participants from fully adopting child- and family-sensitive practice echoed the barriers found by previous researchers. For example, having the authorisation of the Framework is insufficient if management structures within each organisation do not support staff to attend such learning opportunities, and then be able to put what they have learnt into practice. As training was delivered to mostly frontline workers, cementing the support of managers remains an important challenge to address. More work is needed at the management level so there is greater authorization from ‘higher up’ in the adult-focused service sector.

Whilst I will feed this information back to my manager, I feel it is imperative they participate in these activities which will then provide me with the resources and support I need to fulfil/achieve outcomes (child- and family-sensitive practice workshop participant).

As the workshops were offered at no cost and were held a number of times in each of the Communities for Children sites, it allowed several staff from some of the agencies to participate. In this way, the initiative was able to create a cohort of trained staff in these agencies. This generated opportunities for peer contact for support and discussion of child- and family-sensitive practice in the workplace. Further, the BCBB team were able to offer follow up visits to agencies to support the implementation of child- and family-sensitive practice. Having multiple staff sharing a common workshop experience also helped to promote more buy-in from the agency management structure as they are more likely to want to see a return on their investment of releasing staff to attend the workshop. Change towards child- and family-sensitive practice will be more difficult in organisations where fewer staff are committed to such a focus than in organisations where a critical mass of staff are aligned with this perspective. As many agencies provide a range of different services there is room for improved internal collaboration; this may be facilitated if a cohort of staff from different services that are provided by the same agency attend child- and family-sensitive practice training. Also, having a cohort of trained staff may make finding the needed expertise within the organisation easier and increase the likelihood of collaboration between services occurring.

Flexible funding mechanisms that promote collaboration are necessary as competition for available funds can act as a barrier to collaboration between services. Scott (2009) states that “silo budget processes need to be replaced with multilateral budget bids, budget pooling, and outcome rather than output measures” (p. 42). Having a history of joint tendering or joint funding arrangements that acknowledge the agency and placed-based histories of collaboration can be an important enabler for collaboration between agencies. Further opportunities for outcomes-focused funding that promote collaborative practice are needed.

Organisational Support

One of the most important aspects to enabling the adult-focused services to recognise the impact of adult problems upon children is the provision of adequate organisational support. As mentioned, the National Framework provides an authorising environment for change but it has to be ‘performed’ primarily by agencies and their workers. These agencies have their own authorising environments, or non-authorising, through which the Framework is filtered. Numerous studies have examined the barriers to, and facilitators for, adult-focused services recognising their clients as parents and working with their children. At the organisational policy level, Tilbury et al. (2012) propose that organisation policies which acknowledge the families of service users, not only as important contributors to the client’s treatment but also as individuals with their own strengths and needs, are an important facilitator enabling practitioners to take the

time necessary to consider the child/ren's needs. Agency-level policy changes need to be reflected in the position descriptions and staff role, workloads, annual performance reviews and in the induction programs for new staff (Mayberry & Reupert, 2009; Tilbury et al., 2012). McNamara (2008) suggests that policy and procedure development is required specifically around case management with children. Policy should make particular reference to child-inclusive practices regarding assessment, case planning and referral. It was noted that employment procedures that do not support employing staff with knowledge of, and commitment to, child- and family-sensitive practice acted as a barrier. Therefore, training around how to approach parents about the impact of their problems on their children is considered to be necessary for staff to develop the skills and confidence required. Clarifying how this approach relates to the requirements of mandatory notification may be particularly necessary for staff in adult and child- and family-focused services.

Walsh et al. (2013) note that there are a number of challenges for adult-focused services who are seeking to become more 'child aware' in their practice. To become 'child aware', Walsh and colleagues propose that an agency needs to go beyond program boundaries and to provide extra training, resources and support for the staff. Funding is an inherent barrier or facilitator to achieving these changes. There are, however, some supportive changes evident with regards to funding. Reforms of the homelessness service sector in South Australia mean dependent children are now required by the terms of the funding contract with each agency, to be considered as service users in their own right.

Development of a Common Assessment Framework

As different adult-focused services have different theoretical approaches and use assessments based upon their particular 'lens' (e.g. alcohol or substance misuse or mental illness), it is important to recognise that such differences can become a barrier to services working together (KPMG, 2011). Highlighting the importance of the shared goal may reduce the impact of this particular barrier; services are able to see why they are doing something that is outside their traditional focus. Further, developing assessment frameworks which take into account how the problems of the parents e.g. alcohol or substance misuse or mental illness etc., affect not only the parent but also their parental capacity may help facilitate collaboration. A common assessment framework can be used to gather all the information that a variety of services may need; rather than having a family undergo a number of separate assessments. The ARACY developed a tool, the Common Approach to Assessment, Referral and Support (CAARS), designed to enhance the capacity of service providers to engage with children, young people

and families through conversations that facilitate early identification of need and the provision of support. CAARS was designed to help develop a shared language between professionals and sectors; a common understanding of the factors that promote the wellbeing of children, youth and families; and a greater focus on early intervention and prevention. The CAARS trial is an example of different professional groups using a common risk assessment tool. The evaluation is ongoing (ARACY, 2013).

Relationships and Service Networks

Building relationships and service networks at the local level is a necessary first step in bringing services together (Winkworth & White, 2011). Homelessness service workers state that regular contact, shared values, knowledge of the organisations and information sharing are important contributors to relationships with other services to address the needs of clients (Gibson & Morphett, 2010). Sharing of information between services and the minimisation of service duplication are other important considerations. Higgins (2011) states that the “challenge is to provide services in a coordinated way, such that families are not expected to be the experts in negotiating the service systems and to ‘pick and choose’ the services that they particularly need’ (p. 8). From the perspective of families, previous research has identified that it is important to families that the services in their lives are coordinated; that the families are seeing everyone, service providers and themselves, working as a team (McArthur & Thomson, 2011).

One of the interesting findings from the feedback provided by child- and family-sensitive practice workshop participants was that it was the first time for both adult and child- and family-focused services to be together in the same room. For many it was the first time they had met representatives of other services operating in their locality. The feedback suggested that engaging with service clients as parents was a challenge for both those from adult-focused and those from child- and family-focused services. The workshop environment allowed the forming of relationships between professionals from different services; a step along the pathway to service collaboration. After participating in the workshop together, contact with another service can change from making a ‘cold call’ to calling a person who had been met at the workshop. Feedback from the participants stressed the importance of informal networks to enhance their capacity to assist clients.

Conclusion

The BCBB initiative was funded out of the first three-year plan arising from the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children. The Initiative promoted understanding that

‘protecting children is everyone’s business’ by enhancing the knowledge and skills necessary for changing the way that Australia addresses child protection (however in only 12 locations). The Initiative sought to build the capacity of a diverse range of services to work purposefully with parents of vulnerable children and to build bridges between services to enable the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

Some of the important learnings that came from the Initiative are:

- Purposeful engagement with managers and practitioners allowed workshop content to be tailored to the needs of a community. Champions at the local level can support change;
- Getting middle managers and supervisors on board is necessary to support the organisational change needed to improve the support available for vulnerable children;
- Getting everyone together in the same room is hard and can take a lot of effort - a lot of time is needed to understand the local context to ensure that any training reflects the local situation;
- Providing collaboration and child- and family-sensitive practice workshops at no cost a number of times built capacity within agencies and community;
- The importance of training practitioners to learn how to address parental concerns. Both adult-focused and child- and family-focused services acknowledged that approaching the parental roles of their clients could be challenging;
- Implementation support is required to support and maintain practice change; and,
- Access to reflective supervision that supports practitioners’ learning is essential to sustain change.

Despite identifying a number of systemic barriers while working to advance the national policy direction that protecting children is everyone’s business, there is much to be positive about. It is clear that many practitioners want to work together to improve the lives of vulnerable children. A new focus on Child Aware Approaches, supported at the national level, helps them to do that in ways that can advance child wellbeing in Australia.

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