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*Moving to prevention: exploring outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children through intensive or targeted family support services*

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# The rationale

- Need for family preservation and reunification services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families
- International evidence base for intensive family support
- But need to know more about effective models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- Look to innovative good practice in services across Australia



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# The project

- Intensive/targeted/specialist family support models for family preservation or restoration
- 5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations
- Services in Qld, NSW, Vic and NT
- Urban, regional, metropolitan and remote locations



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# The method

- 5 x 3 focus groups with caseworkers and managers:
  - about ‘what works’ to enable or hinder positive change for families
  - to examine 6 elements from research about effective services in day to day practice
- Interviews with parents about what was helpful, or not, why, and how the family is going since services ceased



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# The findings overall – getting things ‘right’

- The right service at the right time, at the right intensity, for the length of time it’s needed, from the right provider
- “It’s real family support. We actually do something to help families (A1).”
- “The program meets gaps in the service system – chronic exposure to DV, on the cusp of removal for 10 years – but not much concerted effort to really help those families (A3).”



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# Findings – Matching needs and services

- Purposive engagement with children and families
- Structured assessment of needs and strengths
- Case management and coordination
- Goal setting with the family
- Working relationship with the statutory agency



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## Findings – Matching needs and services cont

- “There *must* be a purpose to everything, each visit, each contact with family members, it’s not just yarning up, not there to be friends (A4).”
- The service’s assessment is the “real assessment” and is used to develop “realistic case plan goals (A2).”
- “Respected by the department? Yes, sometimes (A5).”



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# Findings – Trusting relationships between staff and family members

- Independence from the statutory agency
- Taking the time to develop a relationship
- The nature of the relationship
- Caseloads
- Matching cases and workers
- Organisational environment



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## Findings – Trusting relationships cont

- Families are encouraged because caseworkers “believe in them, that they can do it”(A3).
- “It is rewarding to walk alongside, be part of that family for that time (A1).”
- “If the team doesn’t work well, then the service won’t work (A5).”



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# Findings – A mix of services to family members

- Practical, educational, therapeutic and advocacy supports available to children and families
- Build from practical to help to addressing deeper issues
- Parenting programs
- Group work
- Home visiting



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# Findings – A mix of services cont

- “We want to use an evidence based approach but it has to fit to this community (A4).”
- “If the client is telling us personal stuff, we’re getting somewhere with them (A5).”
- What motivates the service – “Families to get the help they need (A3).”
- “We see families frequently and over a long period of time – on the verandah, in the yard, at the bus stop (A1).”



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## Findings – Right intensity for the right length of time

- The opportunity the ‘crisis’ presents
- Intensity of contacts between family and caseworkers
- Length of service support to the family
- Flexibility and responsiveness
- Booster and top up services



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## Findings – Right intensity for the right length of time cont

- A motivation is to “get the department out of their lives (A3).”
- It’s unlikely the family “got into the crisis in 5 minutes...there is no hot iron to strike (A2).”
- “Family like the structure, they have other lives, work, school and so on (A4).”
- “That’s the challenge for individual casework of structural disadvantage ... poverty and racism (A1).”



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# Findings – Involving family members in decision making and planning

- Independence from the statutory agency
- Working with *all* family members – mothers, fathers, children, extended family
- Honesty, persistence and patience
- Family goals
- Child and family participation



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## Findings – Involving family members in decision making and planning cont

- Voluntary participation but still “an ultimatum to families – accept the department’s goals or your children will be taken (A4).”
- “We include all the family members if it’s ok with the parents (A2).”
- At the beginning, it’s about “letting the family tell their story (A1).”
- “Doing the department’s goals and adding our own (A5).”



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## Findings – Providing culturally competent and respectful services

- Organisational environment and range and mix of services offered
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing, plus workers' strong personal connections to culture and community
- Individual worker skills, experiences, attributes and background
- Service model adjustments to the local context



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## Findings – Providing culturally competent and respectful services cont

- We have “lived and experienced what clients go through (A1).”
- “Families accept that [name of organisation] is an Aboriginal organisation (A3).”
- “Being Aboriginal helps a fair bit, it’s a heads up for different conversations (A2).”
- “We are a community controlled organisation, we’re guided by community. We work from a community verses legislative bureaucratic framework (A4).”



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# For further information

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