

Strengthening alliances in child and adolescent mental health—promoting parent/carers participation

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Policy and practice context

The child and adolescent mental health system in Victoria can historically best be characterised as a structure underpinned by a range of multidisciplinary perspectives each bringing specific knowledge and skills in the treatment of children, adolescents and their families. Traditionally, this has translated itself into a system whereby parents and carers engage services seeking expertise in solution of problems. This brings with it a dynamic of unequal power and a myth that the solution to the problem can only be externally achieved.

Over recent years there has been an increasing awareness about the inherent problems in this type of approach. These include the inadvertent exclusion of the consumer from the management of their health issues, and on a broader scale, this prevents the system benefiting from the consumer perspective in service development and delivery. A 2009 Victorian Government document, *Participation in Victorian Public Mental Health Services Action Plan*, addresses these problems and highlights the benefits of consumer participation. These include the improvement in health outcomes that result when consumers are involved in decisions about their own health care. As well, involvement of consumers in health care delivery is more likely to lead to overall improvements in the quality of health care through the provision of more appropriate consumer orientated services. Thirdly, accountability as an organisation is enhanced when consumers are involved.

In recent years, both National and Victorian Government mental health policy have highlighted the important role of parents and carers in the delivery of mental health.

Nationally, the *Fourth National Mental Health Plan (2009)* is underpinned by a number of principles which include respect for the rights and needs of consumers, carers and families. This principle affirms the importance of actively engaging parents and carers at all levels of policy and service development.

In Victoria, the development of *Because Mental Health Matters Mental Health Reform Strategy 2009–2019* has enabled the beginning of a new vision in the delivery of mental health services. In particular the strategy highlights the importance of partnerships at all levels of government and specifically between mental health services and parents and carers.

Outside the mental health system the same principles apply, in particular within the education system. The *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (2008)* highlights the importance of developing partnerships with parents where there is first acknowledgement that parents and families have the first and most enduring impact upon childhood learning, development, health and safety.

The *Student Engagement Policy Guidelines (2009)* of the Victorian Department of Education highlights the need to proactively engage with parents and provide opportunities for parental and family involvement.

Notwithstanding, this area remains a considerable challenge.

Implementing participation—a case study

This paper focuses on the experience of engaging parents in a mental health promotion program that works collaboratively with schools in both metropolitan and rural areas. In particular, the focus will be on one of the recently completed projects in metropolitan Melbourne (Wyndham) where parent engagement was prioritised.

This mental health promotion program, The Festival for Healthy Living (FHL), brings together schools and communities to work through a process that aims to enhance the understanding and promotion of mental health. Through the partnership between teachers, artists and health professionals, students, parents and carers are engaged in a range of activities that promote wellbeing. Exploring the concept of mental health with children and young people whose attitudes are still developing provides an opportunity to promote better understanding of mental health, prevent the development of stigmatising stereotypes, and encourage appropriate help-seeking behaviour for those who may experience mental health issues.

Within the FHL approach, performing and visual arts combine with mental health education to provide a pathway for developing positive attitudes and skills that can contribute to children's and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health.

Since 1998, when the FHL began as an initiative to celebrate Mental Health Week, over 10,000 students, and more than 8,000 parents from 100 schools across 7 regions in Victoria, have participated through a range of locally based projects in school and communities.

In 2009 as part of the FHL project in Wyndham, both the leadership and teachers at the participating schools felt that parental involvement was an area for development, with the need for occasions to be available for parents to participate. With this in mind, the Wyndham FHL project, offered a variety of opportunities for parent participation. In the first year of implementation of the project, a family night was held as a promotional opportunity to include parents in the initial stages of the journey. One school hosted the event but attendance was open to parents from all three participating schools. The family night included a barbeque and a range of activities for parents and children to join in together. This event was conducted jointly by artists and health professionals. It provided parents with the opportunity to develop an understanding of how the FHL project would be working with their children.

Overall, feedback from parents on the night was very positive, including comments such as:

- it provided a special time with their children
- it was good to see teacher participation and the three schools working together
- the activities encouraged interaction between parents and children
- the children had fun
- there was positive discussions at home on mental health issues.

One parent commented that even though she had been living in the area for a long time this was the first time she had met people from the other schools. There was also a comment that, along with more music and art activities that parents could share with their children, future sessions specifically for parents would be valuable.

Classroom activities also provided opportunities for parent participation and feedback. One of the artists responded that having mothers attend her classroom sessions was very valuable:

It made an incredible difference when I had the mothers helping...in that we could engage and support every child throughout the session.

Throughout the project, stakeholders reported instances of parents expressing pleasure and surprise at their children's capacity and enthusiasm. For example, following health professional visits to classrooms:

One parent said how her daughter came home and spoke about the things she had learned through the health professional sessions of the Festival.

Parent participation became an increasing priority of the Wyndham FHL in the second year of the project (2010). The origins of this focus are important to understand, as it was driven by parents themselves. One of the schools involved in the program employed a school parent in the position of Parent Liaison Officer. Her role involved helping the school to effectively engage and communicate with the parents and carers of students, as well as to encourage, facilitate and support parents and carers to become involved with the school. As a member of staff, she attended the Professional Development sessions that were part of the FHL project. What she heard and experienced helped her realise that, as a parent, she could do a lot to help her children talk about and understand their feelings and to deal with strong emotions. She was excited at these possibilities and wanted to help other parents and carers become confident that they, too, could contribute to their children's wellbeing and develop their capacity for resilience.

The Parent Liaison Officer was a member of the program Steering Committee as a representative of the parents and carers of children participating in the FHL program. As such, she ensured that the focus on engagement of parents and carers continued to be highlighted, despite conflicting demands on the Committee members' time and priorities. The development of a Families Working Group ensured there was a structure to promote involvement of parents and carers in the FHL Project. The discussions in this working group led to a number of unique initiatives.

The first of these was a focus on assisting the parents and carers to better understand mental health and to empower them to talk with their children about their feelings. Work sheets were developed for use in class and to be taken home to share with family members. They focused on key feelings using simple wording. The words 'I feel happy when ...' were printed on the first work sheet and after a class discussion the children wrote or drew pictures about times they feel happy. There were four work sheets in total, each addressing a different emotion. The back of each worksheet was designed as a parent information sheet. The information included was developed by local health professionals and contained tips about talking with their children about their feelings. It also provided general information about mental health and wellbeing, and details of services that could help if they had concerns about their child's mental health and wellbeing.

The second initiative was to hold community days that were open to family members of all three schools. They were intended to provide positive experiences for parents and families, and contribute to a greater sense of connectedness to the school community. Several events were held and the focus was on parents and carers having fun or enjoying a relaxing time with other families and school staff, with or without their children. These opportunities had a significant impact on those who came, particularly through their experience of observing their children's enjoyment of activities and in building a stronger sense of community within the child's school and with other community members.

The final initiative was the creation of a short DVD to encourage parents and carers to become involved in their school via the FHL project. The intent was also to convey the very important message that families can contribute to their children's learning and wellbeing, helping them to see that this isn't something that only professionals can do. The DVD includes footage of some of the Wyndham FHL events, along with interviews with one family from each school. The parents talk about their involvement in the FHL and at school more broadly, and they comment on how they and their children benefited from their participation in the program. Specifically, the underlying message of the DVD highlights the multiple benefits of parent participation both in terms of strengthening connectedness between parents and schools, and the broader impact on children's as well as family wellbeing. The DVD affirms the role that parents and carers have in partnership with schools to promote the wellbeing of their children through their participation in school life.

This experience of facilitating parent and carer involvement in a school context, revealed some of the benefits of their participation as well as some of the barriers that work against it. It is important for schools and health services to engage with these challenges and opportunities in their efforts to connect with children and young people and to encourage parent and carer involvement.

Promoting participation—rural areas

The Wyndham FHL project was conducted with a group of schools in a metropolitan region; however, many of the benefits and opportunities in relation to parent engagement would be applicable to most schools and services irrespective of their location. While rural schools and health services face many of the same challenges as those in metropolitan regions, the issues may be further compounded by factors related to distance and isolation as well as socio-economic pressures.¹ All of these may make parent and carer participation more difficult.

On the positive side, parents in rural areas often view schools as a core focus of the community. This value stance can bring with it a willingness and enthusiasm to engage with schools, which may not exist in non-rural contexts. In contrast to metropolitan regions, rural families often have better connections to others within their community. They may know health professionals, teachers from the school and other parents socially or through broader connections within the community. This can be perceived as either a positive or a negative depending on the situation and the attitude of those involved.

Research in America¹ argues the case that capitalising on family and community ties is the mechanism to engage parents in rural schools as part of a whole community approach to strengthening school-parent partnerships. Efforts to engage parents and carers are likely to be most successful when they feel that their participation contributes to the enhancement and cohesion of their community. This reflects the importance of the fundamental need for participation to be tailored to match and be complementary to the local community context.

A strong partnership with the school will increase the willingness and motivation for parents and carers to participate. Initiatives that increase the strength and sustainability of community ties create benefits for community members as well as organisations that operate in those communities, such as schools and health services.¹

Promoting participation—benefits and challenges

Whatever the setting, schools and health services need to identify and address the barriers to parent and carer participation in their own particular context. In facilitating this participation they will realise the benefits that accrue to their organisation as well as to the children, young people, parents and carers they work with.

These benefits are significant and include the fact that parents are better informed; more empowered and have a greater sense of partnership. Parents, children and young people also develop a positive attitude to help seeking, seeing it as a normal practice rather than an admission of failure. Organisations that build strong relationships with parents and carers connect with a valuable source of expertise that will assist them to improve their capacity to make a difference and to contribute to stronger communities.²

The challenges to achieving effective parent and carer participation may come from within the organisation or be the result of parent and carer attitudes. Parents may see schools and health services as places of professional expertise that they don't understand, and they may feel out of place. They may also find organisational practices and processes inflexible and alienating. Parents may be unaware of their capacity to contribute and of the significance and importance of what they have to offer.

Addressing challenges can often be a barrier in itself, but the benefits of facilitating parent and carer participation outweigh the difficulties. Creating a welcoming family friendly environment will help parents and carers feel more comfortable. One aspect of this will be a review of policies, processes and practices in consultation with and from the perspective of parents and carers. Educating parents about the impact they can have on their child may give them a greater appreciation of the significance of their role in supporting their child's learning and wellbeing. The employment of a parent/carers representative can enable an organisation to identify and overcome many of the barriers that stand in the way of parent and carer participation. Having someone such as a Parent Liaison Officer in a school (as in the case study) or a consumer consultant in a health setting can promote effective engagement with families and gain honest feedback. They are also able to use their own experience to encourage and facilitate the involvement of others.

Conclusion

Prioritising the development of alliances with parents and carers is emerging as an important strategy for health and education systems. There is increasing evidence that this trend has the potential for produce positive outcomes for family and community wellbeing.

Both metropolitan and rural communities can benefit from the opportunities afforded by parent and carer participation. For rural services in particular, a key variable that will impact on positive outcomes is the extent to which the participation process is given meaning by its connection to broader community life.

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