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What parents value from formal support services in the context of identified child abuse

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Abstract

Parents whose children are identified as having experienced or being at risk of experiencing significant harm potentially provide an invaluable dimension to our understanding of the circumstances that result in child abuse or neglect and how best to respond to these invariably complex situations. This paper reports findings from a study of the experiences of six parents.

In-depth interviews were conducted with four mothers and two fathers who had been referred to an intensive family support services by the Queensland statutory child protection authority. Using a critical ecological perspective, the study focused on identifying and understanding the experiences of the parents in using formal family support services, including aspects of service delivery that were helpful or unhelpful. Parents also commented on their experiences of statutory child protection services.

Service components and worker qualities that parents identified as being helpful included being accessible, targeted and integrated and being able to meet a continuum of needs, from a micro to a broader level. Their reports provide invaluable insight into how formal family support services, including child protection services, can better meet the needs of parents in addressing the recurring problem of child maltreatment.

Key words: family support, child abuse and neglect, parental perspectives

Introduction

Social support theory, in the context of family and child welfare, focuses on the role that social supports and networks can play in contributing to, or preventing child abuse (Healy & Darlington 1999; Moncher 1995). Research suggests that adequate and positive social support plays an important role in parenting and in providing a buffer to stressors experienced by families (Miller & Darlington 2002; Moran *et al.* 2004; Statham & Holtermann 2004). Further, the presence of social isolation, a lack of social supports, and a high rate of negative relationships with and attitudes to available networks, have been identified as contributing to the risk of child abuse (Beeman 1997; Korbin 2003; Vinson, 2004).

Support to families may be provided informally, through family, partners, friends and community, or formally, through a range of dedicated services such as those developed to provide intensive family support or parenting programs (Healy & Darlington 1995; Moran *et al.* 2004). While many parents have access to appropriate levels of informal and formal family support, others have limited access (Belsky 1984; Darlington & Miller, 2000; Fernandez 1996; Kotchick & Forehand 2002; McCurdy 2005; Moncher 1995).

Additionally, support needs are not static. In times of increased stress, a family's level of need can change, so that a usually adequate level of support may become inadequate (Darlington & Miller 2000). Thus, the level of support a family requires at any one time is influenced by circumstances and may become magnified for families with limited supports to begin with. Along with actual levels of support, an associated key factor is how adequate families perceive the support they receive to be (Beeman 1997). A perceived lack of adequate support can contribute to poor family functioning and inability to cope with situations that a family may otherwise have coped with (Darlington & Miller 2000).

Formal family support services have been provided in various forms since the emergence of child and welfare services during the nineteenth century (Pecora *et al.* 2000). These services have traditionally been provided by governments and organisations that specifically exist to “enhance the quality of family life” (Healy & Darlington, 1999 p. 7), by “improving their capacity to care for children and/or strengthen family relationships” (AIHW 2001, p. xi, cited in Tomison 2002, p. 2). Their aim is to provide assistance to families, with no real expectation of reciprocity (Healy & Darlington 1999).

Family support services comprise primary, secondary, and tertiary intervention services, also referred to as universal, selective and indicated services (Pecora *et al.*, p. 230). Primary, or universal support targets the community as a whole, with generic initiatives, campaigns and community-based services that support parents and families without entry criteria. Their aim is to prevent problems such as child abuse and family breakdown (Healy & Darlington 1999; Moran *et al.* 2004; Pecora *et al.* 2002).

At the next level, secondary or selective support targets specific ‘at risk’ groups, which are those identified as having ‘special’ needs; for example, people with a substance abuse problem, or parents with an intellectual disability (Healy & Darlington 1999; Tomison 2002). They include family-based services (such as counselling, parenting education, skill development), and some home-visiting services (Pecora *et al.* 2002).

Intensive family preservation services are provided at the tertiary, or indicated level, and aim to reduce the recurrence of abuse and the effects and negative consequences that can arise from the abusive situation (Healy & Darlington 1999; Pecora *et al.* 2002). The level of intensity distinguishes these services from secondary support services. Involvement typically includes a family in a state of crisis, where there has been significant harm or a high risk of significant harm towards a child, and the imminent possibility of children being taken into care. In Australia and elsewhere, these services typically work with families where child abuse has been identified, with the aim of assisting to support and maintain a child safely within their family. These services are also referred to as intensive family preservation support services and family support programs based services (Pecora *et al.* 2002).

While it is widely held that increasing our understanding of parents’ experiences of family welfare services can contribute to more effective and targeted service provision (Cleaver & Freeman 1995; Fernandez 1996, 2004; Gauntlett *et al.* 2000; Keller & McDade 2000; McCartt Hess *et al.* 2000), the perspectives and voices of parents and children have generally been absent from research and evaluation studies (Stanley & Kovacs 2003; Thoburn *et al.* 1995; Thomson & Thorpe 2003).

In this article, we report findings from a study of the experiences of six parents who had been referred to an intensive family-based intervention service (IFBS) by the Queensland statutory

child protection service. We then draw implications from the study for the provision of support services to families where children are at risk of harm.

A critical-ecological perspective

Using a critical ecological perspective, the study focused on identifying and understanding the experiences of the parents in using formal support services and the service and worker characteristics they identified as being of value. While critical and ecological theories have much to offer our understanding of child abuse in the context of family support, each has its limitations, and they provide two divergent constructions of social problems such as child abuse. Yet, both theories in fact complement each other; therefore, integrating the two provides a more comprehensive and multi-focal lens through which this complex issue can be considered (Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Lee, 2001; Swenson, 1998). A major limitation of critical theory is that its emphasis on the structural and ideological level explains only part of the complex phenomenon that is child abuse, with little attention to the inter-relationships between individuals and to the relationships between individuals and their environment (Belsky, 1980, Bronfenbrenner, 1979). At the same time, ecological theory holds some inherent limitations in terms of the lack of a critical perspective and its alignment with a belief in principles of truth, consensus and equilibrium, or ‘goodness of fit’ (Besthorn & Pearson McMillen, 2002; Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Swenson, 1998).

A more balanced perspective is needed. Ecological theory adds a crucial dimension to critical theory, recognising the importance of all levels of influence on parents and their families, the inter-relationships with, and interconnectedness between, the different levels within the social system. Critical theory also adds an essential dimension to the notion of ‘goodness of fit’ by ensuring that wider structural and ideological issues are considered in terms of an understanding of power, inequality and oppression and requiring the need for change at a structural level to address issues of oppression and disadvantage (Ife, 1997; Mullaly, 2002). A critical ecological perspective thus provides a more holistic and meaningful lens through which to explore parents’ experiences (Germain & Gitterman 1996; Lee 2001; Swenson 1998).

Method

The aims of the study were to gain an understanding of the challenges and stressors experienced by parents whose children were identified as having experienced significant harm, or being at risk of experiencing significant harm, and how these challenges and stressors impacted on their parenting role. The study also explored the role of formal and informal family supports in assisting them in parenting. In this paper we focus on the parents' perceptions of the tertiary-level formal services they were involved with. These principally included the intensive family-based intervention service (IFBS) and the statutory child protection service. Data were not collected with the purpose of service evaluation; such an evaluation would have required more extensive exploration of service outcomes and the perceptions of other key stakeholders.

Participants

Parents were recruited through an IFBS operating in metropolitan Brisbane. This was an intensive, time-limited (usually three months), home based service for families identified as being in crisis and where their children were at imminent risk of either ongoing statutory involvement, or being placed in out of home care, due to significant child protection concerns. All referrals to the service were received from the statutory child protection authority, who also funded this service.

Participants were sought who had been involved with the service over the last twelve months but were not current clients of the IFBS. In order not to compromise current child protection proceedings, we only included families where any current statutory involvement was pre-existing and did not relate to the child (or children), who was the subject of the referral to the IFBS.¹ The IFBS Coordinator agreed to identify parents who met the selection criteria and discuss with them their possible participation in the study. We also relied on the Coordinator's judgement to approach only those parents whom he considered would not be distressed by the research process. In all, eight families were contacted and from these, six parents agreed to participate in the study.

¹ For example, where a long-term child protection order was in place relating to another child in the family.

Once a parent identified their interest in the project, the first author made contact with them to discuss the study and their possible participation in more detail. Each participant indicated their willingness to be involved in the study during this first contact and a subsequent interview time was arranged, at which time an information sheet on the study was discussed and provided, and written consent obtained.

While every attempt was made to engage an equal representation of mothers and fathers in the study, this did not eventuate, with only two fathers participating. The reasons for this included the prevalence of female-headed single families in the client group and the reluctance of some fathers to participate. This situation is consistent with the difficulty experienced by others in finding and engaging fathers in family-related research (Adcock & White 1985; Baker & Carson 1999; Bradley & Corwyn 2000; Doherty *et al.* 1998; Keary 2000). All six participants were born in Australia and none identified as Indigenous.

Table 1 provides further key demographic information about the study group. Pseudonyms are used in this table and throughout the article.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Data collection

The purpose of the study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of parents' experiences of services and to use this information to inform practice. In-depth interviews were selected to provide rich, descriptive insight into the parents' experiences, to offer "access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words, rather than in the words of the researcher" (Reinharz 1992, p.19), and thereby provide a "virtual window on experience" (Holstein & Gubrium 2003, p. 10; Minichiello *et al.* 1995, p. 10). Semi-structured interview guides were used to enable us to focus discussion and ensure consistency, while allowing flexibility to adapt to the needs of each participant without being controlling (Patton 1990). One interview was conducted with each participant. All interviews were tape recorded with the explicit permission of the participants. The interviews focused on challenges experienced in being a parent; an exploration of the informal and formal supports used; and the participants' experiences of the helpfulness or otherwise of these services.

As the focus of the study was on the parents' experiences, specific data about the outcomes for families were not collected. However, overall, positive or successful outcomes related to maintaining the child safely within their family where possible, redirecting a family away from the child protection system, and assisting families in reuniting with their children through improved parenting and family functioning. Of the parents interviewed, three had children in out-of-home care under a child protection order. (Refer also to Table 1)

Analysis

Depth (rather than breadth) of focus has guided both the interviews and subsequent analysis (Patton 1990; Wolcott 1994). General principles of inductive, thematic analysis approaches were used to organise and make sense of the data (Miles & Huberman 1994; Strauss & Corbin 1998; Wolcott 1994). Categories were used as a way of organising the data. These were derived inductively from the data, thus ensuring their context sensitivity (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We then systematically considered emerging themes, trends, issues and relationships, linking these with existing knowledge to help build on our understanding (Wolcott 1994).

Limitations

The authors acknowledge the limitations to the study resulting from the small sample. The focus was on obtaining depth of understanding of the experiences of this particular group of parents. Moreover, difficulties were experienced in accessing this group of parents. Nevertheless, the perspectives of these parents have provided a richness and depth to our understanding of their experiences. The authors also recognise that accessing the participants through the IFBS raises the potential for sample bias, as the very nature of the service often meant that a strong relationship had been developed with the parents. Attempts were made to minimise this bias through the screening process. This involved requesting the Coordinator of the IFBS to identify and approach all parents who met the selection criteria, including those who the IFBS had identified as not having positive experiences with the service.

What the parents valued

Not surprisingly, in discussing their experiences of child protection and intensive family support services, the parents tended to relate these to particular workers. All the parents highly valued having access to services and workers who were able to meet their needs and deliver what they said they would, particularly during times of increased stress. This was

primarily evident in the parents' experiences with the IFBS, which was universally described as being able to meet their individual needs. It must be noted that the nature of the IFBS was such that involvement with families was intensive, home-based and very accessible, so that parents could contact workers at any time. As such, it was not surprising that the parents found this service to be helpful and positive. However, fundamental to this success was that the service and its individual workers were committed to meeting the parents' unique needs and provided adequate levels of support. This enabled the parents to develop what appeared to be solid relationships with the workers, in which they felt supported and valued.

Conversely, the parents identified negative or unhelpful experiences with services and workers who were not able to meet their individual needs, deliver what they promised, or who were inaccessible. Overall, the parents' expectations were for a greater level of contact and involvement with the child protection workers, often expressing high levels of dissatisfaction and frustration at their actual experiences. This was especially important because of the power inherent in the service in terms of its ability to make significant decisions about the future of their children and therefore, the subsequent implications for their families.

In presenting the findings, we have incorporated both positive and negative experiences within a set of themes that characterised aspects of service provision that participants valued. The major themes identified were: being participative and collaborative; being non-judgmental; having a goal-oriented focus and being clear about expectations; and providing ongoing service and follow-up.

Being participative and collaborative

All six parents reported that they valued having some input into decision-making processes where the service and worker took the time to ask for and listen to the parent's views. Underlying these experiences were the themes of the importance of being acknowledged as a parent and of being actively engaged in the service relationship. Five of the parents related experiences, primarily with child protection workers, where these qualities were lacking. They described a lack of involvement in decisions involving their families, not being listened to, and/or not being believed.

It is recognised that parental involvement with statutory child protection services is not typically a voluntary experience, with the primary focus of child protection workers being the

safety and wellbeing of children. Therefore, inherent tensions exist between the role of statutory child protection services and the wishes of parents. In fact, the majority of the parents identified negative and unhelpful relationships with child protection services, reporting that they had had no rights or voice. Consistent feedback from the parents was for child protection services to involve them and their children in the assessment and decision-making process, rather than simply telling them what to do. These parents described relationships that were antagonistic and where they were left feeling powerless and helpless. While a number of the parents acknowledged the primary role of child protection services as being the protection of children, they clearly identified that workers needed to ask for, and listen to parents' perspectives, in order for these services to be more effective. This issue was interconnected with experiences of not feeling acknowledged or valued as a parent. Parents identified the need for a shift from unequal and adversarial relationships to ones that are more collaborative and co-operative. This is illustrated in the following comments from Richard and Rebecca.

Well um, let's put it this way, they stripped me of my parenthood, like um, even though I wasn't really focussed on my parenthood at the time, they did, they stripped me totally of my parenthood, I had no say whatsoever in the upbringing or care of my children....Welfare... they've got to have an understanding of families when they take kids from the families, they got to let the parents get more involved and listen to them, I know some parents don't deserve the children, I understand that quite clearly, but there are other parents...I believe they should have more interaction with the parents ... listening to them about the children and that and the parents have more interaction with the children, as long as the welfare feels safe. And parents got to realise that welfare have got to do what they got to do for reasons.
(Richard)

[The child protection services should] look into the situation more, before they jump ahead and take your kids off you...be supportive and want to listen to your side of the story and not just the allegations that have been made, like them, they just didn't want to listen to me at all...and they just made me out to feel...really bad. (Rebecca)

Participants' experiences of statutory child protection services were not all negative. Susan, for example, differentiated between different child protection workers.

I've got to admit, most child protection officers and offices are pretty nasty, but I found that the one in [Area Office] here, they're actually quite nice....They're just more [pauses to think] they listen more – and they actually take in what you're saying and not saying “oh yeah, we don't like the way you're doing this, this is how you should be doing it, blah blah blah”...they [Area Office] listen to what we have to say and...they told us how they wanted things to go and actually asked us how we wanted things to go instead of telling us, okay, “this has to happen and this has to happen and this has to happen”, but yeah, they let us...make some of the decisions as well, which is good. It's one less stress.
(Susan)

Being non judgmental

The parents identified positive experiences with services where they felt they were valued as individuals, and not being unfairly judged, blamed or made to feel as though they were 'bad' parents. Where these relationships existed, as they universally did with the IFBS, the parents described the services as being positively supportive and helpful. There appeared to be a positive relationship between achieving outcomes and goals and the parents feeling they were listened to, valued and involved in service provision. Consequently, these services were identified as being empowering. All six parents described this quality in relation to the IFBS. For example, Debbie said:

...[IFBS's] actually like you're one-on-one and they're more, they're more willing to listen, they're more willing to help ...yeah, if I don't like something I can say straight away, I don't want to do this, I don't like this, and yeah, they understand and they go “alright, you don't have to.” (Debbie)

Karlie also reflected these experiences when talking about a parenting course she attended:

...like they never, they never make you feel as though you were um a bad person, you know, or anything like that, and I felt, felt yeah, really comfortable. (Karlie)

However, where workers were experienced by the parents as being judgemental, these relationships were described as being negative and unhelpful. These experiences were

specifically described in relation to the child protection services by five of the parents. While the nature of the parents' involvement with child protection services was acknowledged, these relationships were described as being adversarial and therefore unhelpful in working to resolve the child protection concerns. The parents' experiences with other services suggested that relationships based on trust and collaboration were more helpful and effective. This was clearly a message the study parents wanted to make to formal support services generally, and to the statutory child protection service in particular.

Having a goal-oriented focus and clear expectations

The parents valued services and workers who had a practical and goal-oriented focus. They all identified these qualities as being extremely helpful, with some describing a sense of achievement and accomplishment in reaching mutually agreed goals and jointly reviewing outcomes. For others, the practical nature of some services and workers was described as assisting them to develop new skills and knowledge, and to feel better equipped as a parent. This was particularly important for those parents with limited informal support networks. This issue was unanimously identified in relation to the IFBS, with the parents reporting an increased level of confidence in parenting, indicating the empowering and positive effect of services and workers with these qualities. Debbie's experiences with the IFBS reflect these themes for the parent group:

[I feel] a lot better about myself, and um, they give me a lot more confidence and like they've helped me with a lot of things, like getting [daughter] into a routine. Like mornings were terrible for me, but now, we've got like a routine down pat...and yeah, they've done wonders for me. (Debbie)

Having access to someone who could provide practical advice or guidance in terms of parenting was also highlighted as being important, especially in light of the lack of informal supports available to most of the parents. Richard's comments accentuated the value placed on this quality by the parent group:

Oh, we just went over a lot of things, yeah, she just gave me guidelines and helping me out with [youngest son], you know, like um I didn't have many people to ...ask a lot of questions about bringing up [youngest son], and [IFBS Worker] was kind of like um, a mother that I didn't, you know, when my mum

used to be around I used to communicate with her but [IFBS Worker] kind of like was there and I opened myself up to her it took me a while to open up to her as a, yeah, one-on-one person, but...[IFBS Worker] was a good person, she um, guided me well ... through the hard times. (Richard)

Services and workers who had clearly articulated and agreed expectations of parents were identified as being positive and helpful. These qualities contributed to a sense of achievement and empowerment as the parents knew what was expected of them and could work towards accomplishing this.

Conversely, where expectations by the service or worker were unclear, not articulated, or inconsistent, the parents described negative experiences including feeling unsupported, feeling out of control and being unfairly blamed when expectations were not met. These experiences were particularly evident for five of the parents in their relationships with specific child protection workers. They described having unclear expectations of what they were supposed to do, with goal posts being changed in terms of the outcomes they needed to achieve before having children returned to their care, and feeling frustrated and powerless in these relationships. Debbie eloquently expressed this theme, in talking about when her eldest son was in care:

Well um with [eldest son]...I had to go to DV counselling, all that sort of thing and I did that, and then they said I had to do a parenting course, I went and I did that. I did everything they told me to and then it came down to okay, '[eldest son] wants to come home, it's time for [eldest son] to come home' and [eldest son's] there saying "mummy, I want to come home", and we had this other [child protection] worker...at that stage, and I said 'yeah, you can come home soon bubba', and then he turns around and says, "no, because your mother hasn't done everything she's supposed to do!"...I did everything but they were just looking for something to, like keeping him there longer and making me out to be the bad guy in front of my son! (Debbie)

Providing follow-up services

Related to the adequacy of services was the issue of follow-up, particularly with time-limited services such as the IFBS, and some counselling and parenting education services. The

parents highlighted the withdrawal of time-limited support as problematic, unhelpful and stressful, as they were suddenly left to cope on their own with no back-up.

The parents suggested that services should gradually withdraw their assistance, thereby providing them with some level of ongoing support and follow-up. Furthermore, they felt that having access to follow-up services would have better assisted them to maintain the skills and knowledge gained. The following extract from Richard highlighted this theme, reflecting the general views of the parents:

... I believe it [IFBS] could have been longer, because um, like I said to [IFBS Worker], you know, I said, 'some people need help longer', like for instance, they were involved with us for ... six months instead of three, which was the limit, ...and...I believe they should have a follow-on after they've finished the actual three months, ... because it was pretty intense too...in those twelve weeks...but I believe they should have follow[ed]-up like once a week and then wean you off...you know what I mean?...and make sure that things are going well, like um, you're not going to go well for one month and then you fall back, you know...[it's] what happens to a lot of people...they've had all this counselling and it's, it's intensified counselling with one-on-one person, and um, after they've gone, totally out of their life, um, a month later, that person, down the track, is gone...back to the same thing, you know? (Richard)

These findings raise the question of how effective services can be in assisting families to achieve meaningful and sustainable goals when the level and duration of intervention was identified by service users as being inadequate. This was particularly pertinent for short-term, intensive services such as the IFBS where little or no subsequent follow-up was able to be provided. This becomes a critical issue for the sustainability of change for families where child abuse concerns have been identified, and who have limited internal resources, poor role models and limited social support networks. In addition, the expectation that a myriad of interconnected and complex social problems can be addressed without ongoing support is unrealistic and unreasonable (Dale 2004; Moran *et al.* 2004; Statham & Holtermann 2004). For the study parents, these complex problems included the presence of domestic and family violence, substance abuse, mental health issues, an history of the parent having experienced sexual, physical and or emotional abuse and financial hardship and associated stressors.

Implications for service provision

The picture that emerged was of parents who were struggling with multiple and substantial stressors. These included structurally-based stressors such as societally sanctioned inequality, poverty and violence (Dominelli 2002), as well as individual and family-level stressors. An holistic and integrated approach to preventing child abuse thus needs to recognise the role of social, economic and cultural issues, as well as individual factors, and their interconnections (Belsky 1980; Little 1995; Mullaly 2002). From a critical ecological perspective, the findings clearly indicated that the parents required assistance and that having access to adequate levels of support was of critical importance, particularly in the absence of adequate, reliable and positive informal supports (Beeman 1997; Dale 2004; Healy & Darlington 1999; Statham & Holtermann 2004; Miller & Darlington 2002; Moran *et al.* 2004). However, their experiences indicated that most often, access to ongoing appropriate formal supports was inadequate, which in turn helped to perpetuate a cycle of stressors and inability to cope.

Much of the formal support accessed by the study parents was time-limited and restricted in terms of what could be provided. Brief, time-limited interventions with families who have a high level of need and who are experiencing multiple stressors are unrealistic (Fernandez 2004). By the time families are referred to services such as those provided by IFBS, it can be assumed that their levels of stress will be high, their capacity and ability to function will be low, and they may well be in a state of crisis (Callahan 1999; Cleaver & Freeman 1995; Dale 2004; Fernandez 2004).

A risk of time-limited services is that such services tend to imply that parents should be able to cope on their own, when in fact no family does. This conclusion is supported by the findings of Callahan (1999, p. 57), who argued that such services send messages that “capable” or “good” parents do not need ongoing support or assistance and they should be able to ‘improve’ with the services offered to them. Such messages reinforce a perspective of individual pathology and blame, with the focus clearly on the need for the individual parent to improve (Mullaly 2002; Pelton 1998).

Services that offer follow-up or “booster sessions” to families have been identified as contributing to the long-term effectiveness of an intervention (Moran *et al.* 2004, p. 8). Not providing ongoing follow-up support services for this particular group of families, especially where the stressors, or their ability to address these have not significantly changed, can in fact

set them up to fail (Fernandez 2004, p. 101; Moran *et al.* 2004, p. 81). Therefore, the failure to comprehend and address the full extent of a family's needs has implications for the long-term sustainability of goals achieved during the service period. Formal supports offering only short-term, time-limited services may merely delay further crises (Callahan 1999; Cleaver & Freeman 1995).

Services that engage meaningfully and positively with parents, with clearly articulated and agreed expectations, are more likely to result in positive outcomes for the child and family (Cleaver & Freeman 1995; Dale 2004; Fernandez 1996; Little 1995; Moran *et al.* 2004; Statham & Holtermann 2004; Thomson & Thorpe 2004). This can help alleviate the problem of disparity in expectations between service providers and service users and the feelings of powerlessness, thereby helping to maximise the effectiveness of these services (Dumbrill 2006). The experiences of the parents in this study indicated a gap between what they expected and needed from services and workers, and what was provided. These findings are consistent with the current international research into what constitutes effective family support services (Dale 2004; Moran *et al.* 2004; Statham & Holtermann 2004; Thomson & Thorpe 2004

While children's safety, well-being and rights clearly need to remain the primary focus of child protection services, our findings support emerging research advocating an approach that moves away from a 'child-rescue' philosophy, to recognising the important role of support for parents (Aldgate & Statham 2001; Scott & O'Neill 1996; Thomson & Thorpe 2004). A family-focused, holistic and integrated approach to policy and service provision is essential for sustainable, long-term solutions to address the problem of child abuse (Aldgate & Statham 2001; Her Majesty's Government 2003; Little 1995; Moran *et al.* 2004; Tomison 2002). There is a pressing need for policies and services that are both child and family-focused, particularly in providing an integrated range of universal and targeted preventative and early intervention services to assist families before they reach crisis point (Cleaver & Freeman 1995; Little 1995; National Crime Prevention 1999; Scott & O'Neill 1996; Thomson & Thorpe 2004).

There is also a need for strategies to address structural issues of poverty and inequality, and to provide universal access to basic services and supports such as health, education, housing, and family support. This does not detract from the need for strategies that address the micro level,

in terms of adequate services to support children and families where significant harm or risk of significant harm has been identified. Rather, it recognises that on their own, strategies based on services for individual families in crisis are insufficient and can perpetuate the conditions that contribute to multiple stressors over which parents have little or no control (Healy & Darlington 1999; Little 1995; Moran *et al.* 2004; Pelton 1990; Vinson 2004; Wekerle & Wolf 1993).

The evidence points to the need for integrated and holistic strategies that simultaneously address the different levels of challenges for services to be meaningful and sustainable (CMC 2004; Dale 2004; Her Majesty's Government 2003; Statham & Holtermann 2004). No single intervention, service, or organisation can do this alone. A combined effort by all key stakeholders is required (Moran *et al.* 2004).

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Table 1: The study participants

	Karlie	Susan	Debbie	Pete	Rebecca	Richard
Age	28	25	29	39	19	39
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Female	Male
Education	Year 12	Year 8	Year 11	Year 10	Year 9	Year 10
Marital Status	De-facto	De-facto	Single	Divorced/ Single	De-facto / Single	Separated/ Single
Income Source	Centrelink ²	Centrelink	Centrelink	Full time employment	Centrelink	Casual Employment
Number of children	5	6	4	3	2	7
Children in out of home care	0	5	3	0	0	6

² This is the Australian Government department that provides income support to families, among a range of other benefits and services.