



How should family services respond to “Children in Need”?

Seismic changes in family life are blamed for increasing risks for children. A consensus is forming that service providers need to work more in partnership with families from early in the emergence of problems, and with more supportive services to buffer children from potential adverse consequences. Yet there is no clear agreement about the services that need to be provided. Should “Children in Need” be part of the strategy for moving forward?

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In this discussion, the expression “Children in Need” derives from the UK Children Act 1989. It refers to a category of children who require services additional to those that all children require in order to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health and wellbeing.

Under the Act, local authorities have specific duties to provide a range of services to Children in Need to safeguard and promote their welfare, whether this help is provided to children while they live at home with their families, or when they are in the care of the state. Services may be provided to any members of the family in order to assist a child in need. Services include those provided by local authority children’s services, local authority adult services, or by any other agency.

The Department of Health in England constructed a theoretical framework as part of the agenda for working with Children in Need and their families in the community. A series of complementary forms were developed as a means for assessment, planning and analysis of children’s needs, which were designed to encourage the local authorities to integrate them into a comprehensive system for social service work. The materials that operationalise the Children in Need framework are linked to the UK “Looking After Children” system for planning and reviewing cases involving children in public care, which is now widely used in Australia (Wise 1999).

In 2000–2001 Anglicare Victoria trialed the Children in Need materials to assess whether they would provide a means for

more systematic attention to the needs of children who come into contact with family services. The Australian Institute of Family Studies, with the University of Melbourne Department of Social Work, undertook an independent assessment of the value of the framework and the accompanying materials. Worker feedback on its usefulness for practice, and other data sources, formed the basis of the evaluation, and is used in this Briefing to address the key question:

Should family service agencies in Australia adopt the Children in Need system and, implicitly, be given responsibility for vulnerable children irrespective of their administrative or legal status?

Why focus on child needs in family services?

Although family services typically work directly with parents to address a wide range of family circumstances (Mulroney 1998), they target families with dependent children to ensure that parental stress and problems do not adversely affect the health and development of their children. Linking interventions through family services to promote optimal conditions for child development is therefore in keeping with the overall objectives of the service.

The rationale for the Children in Need framework is to provide a basis for improving outcomes for vulnerable children by assisting practitioners in their tasks of analysis, judgement and decision-making.

Using the Children in Need framework in family services should have a positive impact on children's life chances. Unmet needs that result from family situations (for example, lack of positive emotional response because of parental stress) pose a risk for children. Responding more urgently to children by supporting families to ensure the provision of adequate care, educational opportunities and health services should help prevent the development of problems that are usually difficult and costly to treat.

Children in contact with family services may also have additional needs or problems that have gone undetected. More systematic attention to children's developmental progress within family services can help ensure such problems are identified and acted upon at the earliest possible stage.

Currently, families are often inappropriately drawn into the child protection process. It has been argued that protecting children by supporting families is a far more appropriate and effective response for families with general needs than taking a protectionist response (Knight and Caveney 1998: 37).

Although child protection services have begun to refocus their services to provide more support to families on a basis of partnership, this may be easier to achieve when the coordinators of services sit outside the statutory child protection system. Because family support services are also located in communities, contact with them may help families develop social networks and build linkages to kin and community members within their own local area, which can serve as supports once contact with the family support service is concluded.

Offering greater support and assistance to help families in the raising of their children can help reduce the reliance on child protection services to manage cases that do not warrant protective intervention, and help tilt the balance between support and protection more appropriately toward family support.

What does the Children in Need system offer?

In Australia, cases involving children who are abused tend to have priority in access to services, whereas cases involving vulnerable children in families requiring support would tend to be seen as having a lower priority, and may not receive services. During the implementation period for the current study, approximately half of all client families accepted by family services had a child that was judged to be "in need" and requiring additional services. Family services need to be able to access the necessary services for these children and their families if good outcomes are to be assured.

The Children in Need system is designed to ensure the child welfare system functions for a broader population of children than child protection clients, as determined by need. It gives family support work the high status it deserves.

The Children in Need materials are designed to support a process of systematic information gathering about individual children and their families in a way that facilitates analysis and planning and improved joint working between local agencies. Child-centred record keeping also forms the basis of measurements of good performance that can be used to demonstrate the effect the service is having on children and their families.

The framework informing these processes is evidenced based. It is predicated on ecological and holistic theoretical perspectives that link the needs of children to the extent to which parents are responding appropriately, and to the family and environmental factors that may impact on the child and parenting capacity. The Children in Need materials also include a summary section that makes it clear how services are to be provided, thus offering a means by which services can work together.

In the Victorian context the potential benefits of the Children in Need approach were only partially realised in practice. Anglicare Victoria family service workers generally indicated the materials helped facilitate holistic assessment, analysis, judgement and decision-making around child needs. It was also clear from a comparative analysis that the Children in Need materials focus more on information gathering and planning around individual children than do the Anglicare Victoria assessment formats that exist currently.

"Writing down the strengths and issues gave a clear balance of what the child's abilities were, the parents' abilities and feelings, and the worker's observations."
(Family service worker)

Notwithstanding these positive results, the Children in Need materials did not increase accountability or commitment from a range of providers for individual children, nor did they foster understanding about the nature of child's needs across different types of services. This was despite the involvement of professionals and agencies outside of Anglicare during the information-gathering phase, as well as involvement of the client family in making the assessment. Indeed, family service workers reported significant barriers to shared responsibility for children.

"Other agencies/professionals are happy to have a consultation but they are not available to participate in collection of information or formal planning process. They are also unfamiliar with the process." (Multiple roles in family services)

Work is therefore needed to improve opportunities within the communities of local services for inter-agency and inter-disciplinary work with and for children in the community. This would involve:

- legislation that supports a policy of responding to Children in Need, which commits access to services;
- the development of policies surrounding the respective responsibility of services and professionals in assessment and planning;

- formal protocols for receiving requests for advice, information and further work with children and families;
- formulation of protocols surrounding the sharing of information across professional boundaries;
- professional skills development in inter-agency planning; and
- local service planning.

Does the approach “fit” in family services?

Family support services have a specific role, philosophical framework and style of work. According to Mulrone (1998: 21), “family support services assist families to make changes to address issues of concern to them”.

It seems that whether or not children form a major or explicit focus in family services will depend largely on the source of referral or presenting problem, and the needs presented by the parent. Traditional approaches to assessment and planning in family support services tend to involve a process of engagement with families in problem definition and solution finding. Typically, programs focus less on the paperwork of assessment, and rely more heavily on induction, socialisation and supervision of staff to frame the assessment approach.

Anglicare Victoria family service workers who used the Children in Need materials provided a searching critique of their value and appropriateness for family support services. Child wellbeing, albeit in the family context, was regarded as an important focus for family services.

However, individual responses indicated a potential polarisation of family support and child protection. Family support was described as non-statutory work, set up to respond to concerns of the family with no imperative to respond beyond the goals that the parents set themselves, whereas child protection work was described as statutory work, which carries a mandate to ensure children are adequately protected.

For some, giving priority to the needs of children in a family service context was likened to child protection work, as if it was somehow in opposition to family support.

Family services cannot require families to participate in their activities. There was some concern that focusing on children, at least during the early stages of contact, would undermine efforts to support parents in their functions as executive heads of the family system, and reduce concerns about seeking help from an outside body. Focusing on individual children was considered potentially threatening and intrusive to families who had voluntarily presented to services with their own specific issues.

“There is frequently only a tenuous foothold in working with some of these families, so such a massive enquiry into people’s lives may be quite counter-productive even if it means we know a lot about what’s going on.”
(Family counsellor)

To give the needs of children priority status in family services will therefore require acceptance and understanding, and new practice models that can help workers maintain a focus on *both* the child and the parents in family service practice, where the balance from parent to child shifts according to need.

Moreover, there are many roles in family support services, such as family counsellors, case managers, in-home family service workers and early parenting support workers. Not all types of family service workers take on a case management role, and not all have specialised knowledge of child development. Indeed, implementation of the Children in Need materials highlighted that knowledge of and ability to apply assessment procedures and case management practices around the needs of children varied considerably across programs and roles within family support.

Adopting a case management response within family services around the needs of children will necessarily involve changes in the professional and organisational infrastructure for a number of programs.

The addition of a child development worker to every family support service is an immediate way of shaping the skills and knowledge base of family services to better respond to the needs of children.

Are revisions necessary?

The layout of the Children in Need materials was generally accepted as logical, and the content was regarded as comprehensive, covering the three domains of the theoretical framework – child needs, parental capacity, and wider family and community issues – in a manner that facilitated holistic assessment and planning. However, practitioners spent within the range of 10 and 29 hours collecting information about the child and family in order to make an assessment of need, and some additional hours developing the implementation plan. They spent even longer gathering information about, and planning for, families with multiple and complex needs.

Family service workers suggested this timeframe was too long for timely delivery of services. The information to be collected about families was judged as too detailed to be effectively used in family service context. It was recommended that the forms be revised and shortened.

The high demand for family support services and the modest resources that family support services are required to operate on are important issues that need to be considered when evaluating the feasibility of a tool that requires considerable amounts of practitioner time. Effort should therefore be directed at training workers in the principles and practices that underpin assessment of Children in Need and their families, with less of an emphasis on the written task of assessment.

Practice tools in and of themselves cannot ensure good practice. But they can *promote* good practice. Modifying or shortening the Children in Need materials need not mean undermining the integrity of the approach if the principles that inform assessment and planning are preserved in practice.

Irrespective of the burden of formal information recording, taking lead responsibility for coordinating and taking forward a service plan based on the needs of children and their families will demand additional time, and consequently resources.

"I see it as being a core element of good practice to liaise with other people that are working with your client and mutual clients. But it's a time factor. It takes a lot of time to actually set up meetings to liaise with workers, bringing case conferences together, but it is very central and if you don't do it the practice can be quite ineffective . . . I think the funding arrangements don't allow for that intricate work that's required."
(Team leader)

Further resources will also be required for the purchase of short-term interventions and services, if there are no legislative changes made to require other community agencies to accept referrals from family services.

Better outcomes for children and families?

It still remains to be seen whether more deliberate and systematic attention to individual children's needs in family services will result in better outcomes for children and their families. However, research suggests we should be addressing the needs of children who suffer disadvantage and deprivation with more urgency than is currently the case.

Increasing funding to family services to allow them to identify and intervene on behalf of children whose level of disadvantage is likely to impact on their long-term wellbeing will represent excellent value for money if such intervention can reduce or prevent developmental difficulties and/or child abuse and neglect.

Irrespective of whether children are known to statutory agencies, provision should be made for the support of children and their families on a needs basis.

The theoretical basis for the assessment of Children in Need and their families developed in the UK is a promising framework for implementing such action within family services. However, refining the Children in Need assessment materials will increase their value within this service context. More work is also needed to develop a working model for practice that maintains a family focus while synthesising and responding to the needs of individual children, and to improve opportunities within the communities of local services for inter-agency service delivery.

Use of the Children in Need approach in family services will help build consensus with respect to standards of care for vulnerable children and should lead to improved outcomes for children and their families than a system that is inclined toward protection and crisis intervention. This will require greater investment in family services to build skills, knowledge and the resources necessary for such action.

References

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Australian Institute of Family Studies

AIFS children and parenting research

The Institute's Children and Parenting Program studies children in the social contexts of their family, community and culture to provide a basis for policy frameworks and services that can enrich children's lives by enhancing care and responsibility for children by their parents and communities.

Children in Need project

With the aid of a grant from the Financial Markets Foundation for Children, the Australian Institute of

Family Studies, Anglicare Victoria, and the University of Melbourne Department of Social Work, completed an independent assessment of the UK Children in Need framework as a means for more systematic attention to the needs of children who come into contact with family services.

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