

Stronger Families Learning Exchange

The Institute is pleased to announce its further involvement in the Commonwealth Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

Described by Prime Minister John Howard as "a sound investment in Australia's future" (FaCS 2001), the \$240 million Stronger Families and Communities Strategy adopts a prevention and early intervention approach to helping families and communities deal with problems at early stages of their development, and to building resilience.

According to Gai Stern (2002) of the Department of Family and Community Services: "The Strategy recognises that the context in which people live includes their community and the broader social and economic environment. It acknowledges the importance of community to the wellbeing of its citizens, the special protective role strong communities have for the very young, and the importance of supporting families in caring for their members."

As part of the Strategy, the Department of Family and Community Services has contracted the Australian Institute of Family Studies to provide a "learning exchange" to support parents, families and communities in their role of caring for young children.

The Stronger Families Learning Exchange has now been established at the Institute with the objective of contributing to the evidence base about the effectiveness of early interventions for families.

As part of the Exchange, a *national clearinghouse* will provide the latest information on research and programs concerned with family wellbeing, primary prevention and early intervention.

The Exchange will also provide *special training and support in action research evaluations* to Stronger Families Fund projects. These are projects that operate under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, financed by its Stronger Families Fund. The Fund is expected to establish some 80 projects across Australia to support parents and families. Local communities are being encouraged and supported to develop ideas and local projects that meet the needs of individual communities and the diverse families that live in them. To date, 14 of these projects have been funded.

Stronger Families Clearinghouse

The Stronger Families Clearinghouse will inform government policy and community program development by:

- collecting and analysing data from Stronger Families Fund projects; and disseminating learnings about the projects back to the projects, the Department and other stakeholders, as well as the wider community;



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- providing special information services to project workers and government officers, including a number of databases containing information about Australian early intervention and prevention projects, and the use of action research methodology;
- analysing aggregated project data to demonstrate trends in early intervention and prevention services for families and children; and,
- providing an email discussion list which offers a venue for the discussion of research, policy and practice issues.

The Clearinghouse will inform the Australian public about developments in this area by:

- publishing regular six-monthly Bulletins containing information about the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, Stronger Families Fund project descriptions, news from the projects, evaluation results, and the latest developments in the field of early intervention and prevention;



- providing a website (www.aifs.org.au/sf/index.html) containing current information and links to resources on prevention, early intervention and capacity building to support the stakeholders of the Stronger Families Fund projects and the wider community;
- providing a help desk with a toll-free telephone line (1800 352 275);

- collecting and providing access to resources on community development, early intervention and prevention, and action research.

Action Research Training and Support Team

It is recognised that an action research evaluation may be a new endeavour for some organisations, and that building it in to everyday work may take some time.

To help with this process, each Stronger Family Fund project will be assigned a member of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange Training and Support Team to guide them through the process of designing and running an action research evaluation. Team members will work with projects to develop an appropriate and workable action research evaluation, and support projects through the cycles of data collection, analysis, reporting and planning for change.

The Training and Support Team member can help projects in the early stages of their work with establishing reference groups for community consultation, and providing practical advice on developing key performance indicators consistent with an action research approach. Subsequently, team members will work with each project to assist with research design, methods, ethical clearance, data collection, data analysis and interpretation. The support will be offered via a combination of site visits and telephone, fax and email interactions.

In the longer term, the project will generate national data on effective practice and early intervention strategies. The Training and Support Team will analyse and report on findings across all projects to the Department of Family and Community Services and in various publications. The results, which will be reported in the Bulletin and on the website, will inform government policy and programs and academic work in the field.

Further information

For further information, or to join the mailing list, contact the Stronger Families Learning Exchange at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Phone: (03) 9214 7871. Freecall: 1800 352 275. Email: strongerfamilies@aifs.org.au

References

- FaCS (2001), *Stronger Families & Communities Strategy*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.
- Stern, Gai (2002), "Overview of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy", *Stronger Families Learning Exchange Bulletin* no. 1, pp. 6-9, Autumn.

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