

Creating

capable communities

A commitment to partnership



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The key principle that drives the initiative and underpins the work of the *Creating Capable Communities* project at Southern Family Life is identifying partnerships with families as the core of success. Change takes time. In acknowledgment of the time that needs to pass before observers can confidently isolate specific changes connected to the project, we consider what the project has taught us so far and how we may continue to build on this.

Creating Capable Communities has been operating for approximately three years. This project aims to support local residents in public housing estates in the City of Bayside in southern metropolitan Melbourne. The project's main strategies include playgroup social activities and peer support groups. For more information on this project, see previous Bulletins and the Stronger Families Learning Exchange website (at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/sf/>).

What is the current profile of these communities?

There are approximately 1200 families residing in the estate of Bayside,

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”
(Mead in Shields 1991)

largely Australian born, but a significant minority are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Many of these families and communities are characterised by social isolation, financial disadvantage, mental health illness, violence, alcohol and drug use and other factors which indicate risk of statutory involvement. These neighbourhoods are further disadvantaged by being surrounded by affluent suburbs which has effectively resulted in the needs of these communities being “hidden” when government statistics identify the profile of the broader community as being relatively advantaged.

The challenge of working with these communities is apparent when we

support the philosophy of a strengths-based, empowerment process approach and start from the considerations of Chapin (1995: 506) when as the “central focus of the helping process” we need to incorporate “the strengths and resources of people and their environments, rather than their problems and pathologies.”

How are we doing?

In those communities where there is a high level of social capital, people will feel part of that community through contribution and participation, they will pull together, mind each other's children, feel safe, strangers will be welcome and no-one will do everything but everyone will do something (Bullen and Onyx 1999: 35). If we are to measure the success of this project by these indications, we can acknowledge the following tangible outcomes.

People feel they are part of the community

Residents drawn from our client database and local networks were consulted about a new community facility. Bringing people together in the safe environment of a community house where new

programs and ideas were discussed and created helped to foster the identity of the group and enhance trust between the residents. Many of the residents had a common bond in being mothers of small children, which helped them to connect with each other and share mutual concerns at a time when being home alone and the demands of caring for young children can create vulnerability and isolation. The building of relationships and an exchange of learning and skills continues between families when they leave the facility.

A feeling of connectedness and belonging grew out of the establishment of the community house. Practical decisions from how to furnish rooms to what programs should be offered became a group decision. Everyone's thoughts and ideas are valued and many participants often have a better idea of what would work for their needs than the facilitators.

The successful implementation of a homework program helped us to acknowledge the importance of asking the residents what it is they want, not what we think they may need. This program has a very good retention rate of children, even though only a few of the parents attend. The children gather together in a safe environment to enjoy a healthy snack, play, socialise and do some of their homework. The inclusion of male workers role modelling positive interaction and introducing outdoor activities to the program has been invaluable. Also young volunteers attending the program is helping to bridge relationships and provide mentors for the younger residents. Homework routines have improved along with reading skills of the children.

A young volunteer who is a single mum herself has formed a very close relationship with the young mums at the estates. Her own achievements in returning to study and progressing towards employment provide other women with a role-model and mentor.

Including minority groups in the programs has created rich cultural experiences for the residents. Cooking national dishes and discussions about different religious customs relating to

food has been part of this experience.

Recently a resident offered to do a baby massage program which included all the babies and young children. This exercise where some of the children let other people other than their mothers massage them created a sense of trust and belonging to the group.

A small girl belonging to an African family was so painfully shy when she first started to come to the programs at the estates that she would not leave her mother's side or speak to anyone. As a result of her friendship with a sensitive little girl the same age from an Australian family, she will now leave her mother to play outside, and



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communicates with the other group members. This relationship has helped her to integrate into kindergarten this year.

Community facilities and programs can link people who are well connected with people less well connected. Isolated residents suffering from different levels of social anxiety have met together at weekends with more outgoing members of the group and expanded their social opportunities and their confidence.

Barbecues and activities held regularly on the estate bring people together in a relaxed informal way. Often people living on the estates are mistrustful of their neighbours and would not regularly socialise with one another. These events currently supported by the agency are beginning to strengthen community participation, create opportunities for residents to meet local service providers. Residents are beginning to associate with the police and other authority roles

through an informal event and create a neighbourhood atmosphere.

People feel useful and are able to make a contribution to the community

Residents have expressed that they feel a certain amount of stigma about living on an estate. Parents believe also the physical layout of the estate which creates a sense of separation from the rest of the community contributes in part to using the environment to "flout" particular laws such as speeding and anti-social behaviour. Bringing outside services and local community members to the estates helps to make residents feel more of a sense of belonging to the local wider com-

munity as well as having a greater understanding of their contribution to the community.

People participate in local community networks and organisations

Residents have felt comfortable enough to put their hand up to participate in a reference group for a new project worker working on the estates.

Several residents have also been involved in meetings to discuss initiatives by the Torch project raising community issues through the arts.

Southern Family Life was overwhelmed with support letters written by residents supporting our programs when they heard we were reapplying for funding to continue to run these programs.

Residents from these public housing estates are also representative of our local community. Many of the referrals of families from these communities are a result of fellow neighbours informing them about our programs and supporting them to make the linkages.



Families are providing testament to others about the benefits they have gained from their own involvement.

A few residents have indicated their interest in participating in our Southern Family Life volunteer program to equip them to work with families in the community.

People pull together for the common good in hard times

Residents responded strongly when their community house was robbed. Residents arrived one morning to find facilitators and volunteers distressed about losing several articles from the house. Residents were quite upset about "their" house being violated and came together to discuss how this could have happened, particularly when it may have been someone who had benefited from using the house. Residents offered to donate items to replace those which had been stolen, helped clean up and waited with the facilitator for the police to come many hours later. Residents kept an eye on



All will help out with something but no-one will do everything

the house over the weekends and evenings.

When one of the young mums had her second baby several residents visited her in hospital and later when she came home. Many have made phone calls to see how she is coping and have been encouraging her to return to the programs as soon as she is able.

Residents instigated the setting up of a "baby clothes and other items swap" during the developmental stages of the community house. This has been very well used and continues to be restocked. New mums are welcome to use the clothes even though they may not have any to donate back. A continual influx of baby items is donated from the local community

and is also part of this valuable recycling initiative.

Residents who have their own transport have been giving other residents a lift to the house and also to other Southern Family Life programs which run in the evening.

Parents of Dunkley Estate rally together when concerning behaviours have involved their children. For example, stealing and vandalism of property has resulted in parents request for police to come and speak with the community.

People welcome strangers

Residents who may have been wary of new people and protective of their privacy have begun to welcome strangers to the facility. As the core group has developed a sense of trust in one another, they have felt less threatened and more empowered to welcome new members.

Residents also contribute their ideas of how to attract more young mums to the programs. They have been the key introducers of new people to the house and have been the word of mouth advocates for encouraging new participants both to the house and to other programs for additional support.

One of the residents door-knocked to help spread the word and flyers about a new program that was being offered. New volunteers and students on placement have been welcomed into the programs by the residents.

All help out with something but no-one will do everything

Domestic duties at Keith Street and Dunkley Community facility are a shared responsibility between facilitators, volunteers and participants. This was not always so. In the initial setting up of the programs facilitators and volunteers took a lead role in performing most of the cleaning up and food preparation.

As mentioned previously, residents with particular skills have offered to contribute these to particular activities and groups.

In fact, many of the examples already given in regard to resident involvement indicate a readiness to take on greater initiative and responsibility which over time will continue to grow.

Where do we go from here?

This is a long-term project which in the context of a community on a journey will probably never reach an end point.

Change takes time, three years is not a long time when confidence, trust and self esteem are lifetime projects for all people. Consistency in partnerships with residents and other community services doesn't happen in the time frame of a funding project. Being there for each other, demonstrating inclusion, empowerment and forming relationships is a commitment that all members of the partnership need to regard as an ongoing journey.

Creating Capable Communities is an investment in the well-being of families and children who have previously been excluded from the opportunities of the broader Australian society. These families and children are critical to ensuring maximum participation to meet the sustainability challenges of the 21st Century.

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