

MY FAMILY FIRST - SUMMARY

There would appear to 'learning gap' in current practice with respect to programs and evaluation documentation around positively engaging with parents who have recently had children involuntarily removed from their care to facilitate their continued involvement with their children. In particular, in the areas of maintaining family connectedness and working positively towards achieving outcomes for family re-unification. Our literature search revealed there had been very few programs of this nature documented in Australia in the past, with the USA and England being a larger source for comparable programs. Our program was developed drawing upon what research was available in Australia and overseas, on working with parents of children in care, and other programs in the public domain that dealt with similar issues, for example, parenting after separation and divorce.

In our own practice we have observed that parents following separation from their child/ren find it difficult to get beyond their anger and grief and move forward in terms of:

- ♣ maintaining/re-building a positive relationship with their children through the opportunities provided by planned contact; and*
- ♣ understanding how the 'system works' and being confident yet responsive in working with statutory workers to begin to plan for their families future through either working towards reunification or a permanent placement plan for their child.*

My Family First was developed as a short term group program to assist parents to deal with grief and loss following separation from their child/ren, plan for more effective contact time with their children and provide education and support so as to enable parents to advocate more positively and participate more effectively in case planning and decision making with the statutory Child Protection System.

BACKGROUND

The title for the project "My Family First" recognises that the point of removal can also represent a point of opportunity. It has the potential to be a time when parents could engage actively with workers as they may be highly motivated to do whatever is necessary to reunify 'my family'.

In late 2002 the Department of Communities Qld (then referred to as the Department of Families) announced funding under *Queensland Families: Future Directions* the concept of *Lighthouse Projects*. The funding was aimed at providing "seed" funding to support innovative and collaborative new ways of working, and business system improvements, that integrate learning and development principles to improve service delivery outcomes.

Mercy Family Services (Fatima) initially commenced in the mid seventies as a Residential facility for children and young people. With the moves toward deinstitutionalisation in the late 80's and

90's the cottages were closed over time and children were placed in foster homes through our Shared Family Care Service. In addition to this we also provided a live-in Family Support program aimed at reunification and/or prevention of removal of children from parents as well as intensive support and counselling for primary carers of young people with challenging behaviours. We currently have Shared Family Care and provide supported family contact and reunification work through our Specialised Counselling and Assessment Service. This service is staffed by a team of multi-disciplinary professional staff of psychologists, social workers and family support workers.

We saw the Lighthouse Funding as an opportunity explore a belief that the grief parents experience at the time of removal of their child/ren from their families and associated complications of this, impact negatively on their ability to work positively and proactively in maintaining their connectedness with their children. Additionally, this can hinder or destroy their ability or motivation to either have their family reunited, or accept the need for an alternate placement option for their child/ren with clearly defined and negotiated contact opportunities to maintain their family linkages and their roles as parents in their children's lives.

Like many other workers in the Out of Home Care system we recognised that we are dealing daily with grief and loss experienced by children, carers, and workers. The efforts of many professionals within the Child Protection system, is concentrated on the care and protection of the children. In the literature we see an emerging trend towards the recognition of the impact of grief for parents whose children have been removed. There would appear to be few existing services or groups specifically established to support parents following the removal of their children, with those that do exist, often operating in an ad hoc manner and with little government funding. We acknowledge some movement within Queensland through the work of Ros Thorpe and Jane Thompson (James Cook University) and the establishment of the *Family Inclusion Network (FIN)* to establish a service to work with parents in the interests of their children.

Attendance at sessions at the ACWA 2002 conference in September reinforced this view, in particular Theresa Burgheim's presentation of her paper *The Grief of Birth Parents Whose Children Have Been Removed. Implications for Practice in Out of Home Care*. At the same time we were involved with the delivery "Hey Dad" and "Hey Dad for Separated Fathers" which are short term group programs aimed at assisting fathers develop practical parenting skills. These programs were developed by Centacare, Broken Bay, and Uniting Care Burnside, NSW. In the course of our involvement with the groups there were a number of men identified who had experienced separation from their children through relationship breakdown with their partners. They verbalised feelings of grief which appeared barriers to their remaining positively involved in their children's lives. We believed that parent's in the statutory system, who have experienced involuntary removal of their children, could also benefit from similar assistance that would enhance their coping with their post-separation grief to enable them to move forward to enjoying positive relationships with their children, in particular enjoying contact times.

Our project was funded through the *Future Directions Lighthouse Project's* initiative to undertake a literature review around programs being delivered elsewhere to assist parents engage with their children and with the services/workers within the Child Protection system. Using the information from this review we then developed and trialled, in close collaboration with the Department of

Communities QLD, a short term group program (9 sessions). The project team involved DOC officers, workers from our service and other key stakeholders in critical reflection of what has worked/not worked within an Action Learning framework.

The highlights of the project were an expanded practice knowledge that is captured in the development of the Practice Template (*My Family First* manual) that allows other agents, to replicate the program; and also the progress of the participants over time within the program trial groups.

PERCEIVED AIMS & OUTCOMES

Through effective exploration and assistance with the impact of parental grief and loss following separation Outcomes 1, 2 & 3 will be achieved.

Outcome 1: A reduction in participants' negative feelings associated with the loss of children through statutory removal.

Outcome 2: Parents plan for, and have effective contact time, with their placed child, so that their child experiences the contact positively and the relationship between parent and child is enhanced.

Outcome 3: Parents demonstrate an enhanced understanding of the child protection system and are more responsive to working with Departmental Officers to plan for their family's future. This might include a commitment to addressing the issues that: a) led to placement and working towards reunification; or
b) to a realistic long term plan which involves ongoing "out of home" care.

On completion of the program the following was to be produced

Outcome 4: A program is developed that can be replicated in other settings through the delivery and evaluation of the trial programs (9 x 2 hour sessions per course) to two groups of parents (between 6 and 8 persons in each group). The second course will incorporate learning's from the delivery of the first course, thus gradually refining both content and process.

Outcome 5: A Reading Pack – abstracts and references that have informed the identification of best practice in working with parents whose children have been removed.

MANUAL CONTENT & OUTLINE

Program Description

- A nine-week information, sharing and education program for parents whose children are in care with Queensland Department of Communities. The program runs for 2 hours a week. The group

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should consist of 10 to 12 individual parents to benefit from joint discussion and group learnings.

- It is for parents (couples or singles) who have recently had a child or young person placed on a Child Protection Order and whose children are living out of home.
- Participation is Voluntary
- Referrals are through Family Service Officers (FSO's) – who link interested parents to the program co-ordinator.

Group Process Aims

- Support and educate parents in handling grief and loss and associated negative feelings arising from being separated from children while are in care.
- Handle changes in parenting and maintain on going involvement in a parenting capacity.
- Understand and keep focused on child's needs. Develop enjoyable contact time.
- Develop alternative communication skills
- Develop knowledge and skills necessary to work with Department of Communities (DOC) and Foster Carers.
- Guest speakers from Create, Legal Aid Qld and DOC were speakers invited in later sessions of course. Invited speakers help to establish understanding and develop supportive rather than adversarial relationship between parents and DOC.

Topics covered in the Program

Session One – Getting Acquainted covers group rule establishment, changed roles in parenting, emotional responses to separation and loss

Session Two – Our Experiences covers parent's feelings about children entering the care system, tasks associated with adapting to loss.

Session Three – Strengths & Weaknesses – Busting the Myths –exploring the myths around separated families & introduce the "New Family Charter of Rights".

Session Four – Understanding Child Development – Ages and stages of child development, behavioural responses of children to separation, helping children to manage separation.

Session Five – Communication & Navigating the Child Protection System

Exploring types of communication, establishing a successful relation with the Dept.

Role playing Family Meetings

Session Six – How does it all work? Guest speakers Legal Aid Qld and Dept. of Communities.

Session Seven – Working together & Being together. Developing positive working relationships with foster carers, understanding their role, the "Statement of Standards". How to make successful family contact time.

Session Eight – What is it like for young people in foster care?

Guest speakers from CREATE and a foster carer

Session Nine – Moving Forward. Reflection of learnings from the sessions and planning how to progress their relationship/plans for their family. Links with community and support agencies.

SAMPLE AND STUDY METHOD

- Participants were initially parents (couples or singles) who in the past twelve months had a child or young person placed on a Child Protection Order for the first time and those children were living out of home in alternative care.

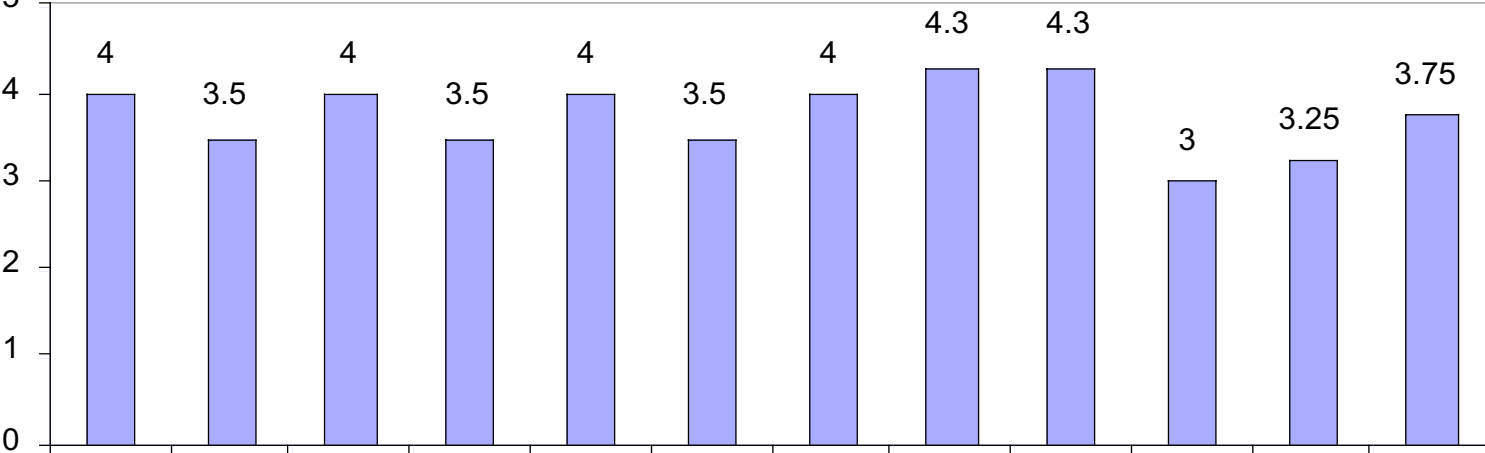
- Participation was voluntary and Departmental Child Protection Officers linked interested parents to the project co-ordinator for inclusion in the group.
- As there were difficulties recruiting sufficient numbers of participants during the formation of both groups, parents who had children on orders in excess of one year were also included in the group. The program was delivered to an initial pilot group of four parents (all single) and later to a second pilot group numbering six parents (two couples and two single parents). Only five responded to the evaluation.
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of the program with the first pilot group was assessed by a post program self report questionnaire. In the second pilot group a pre and post self report questionnaire was completed. We looked at variables such as anger, worry, lowered mood, relationship with statutory body, relationship with children and feelings of control. Some item questions used in the first group questionnaire were altered or replaced in developing the questionnaire for the second group evaluation.
- The members of the second group were also interviewed at the finish of the course, to ascertain what aspects of the course they found most useful.
- Observations of the group dynamics and experiences of the parents who participated was also recorded by the group facilitators.
- Where possible Family Service Officers (FSO's) case managing the statutorily removed children of the parents participating in the group were interviewed after the programs completion for comments on the progress of the respective family's

RESULTS & FINDINGS for Outcomes 1-3

Group 1: Post-test Mean Score

Mean Score

Extremely True 5
 Definitely True 4
 Moderately True 3
 Slightly True 2
 Not at all True 1



Assessment Criteria

Table I.

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Group 2: Differences

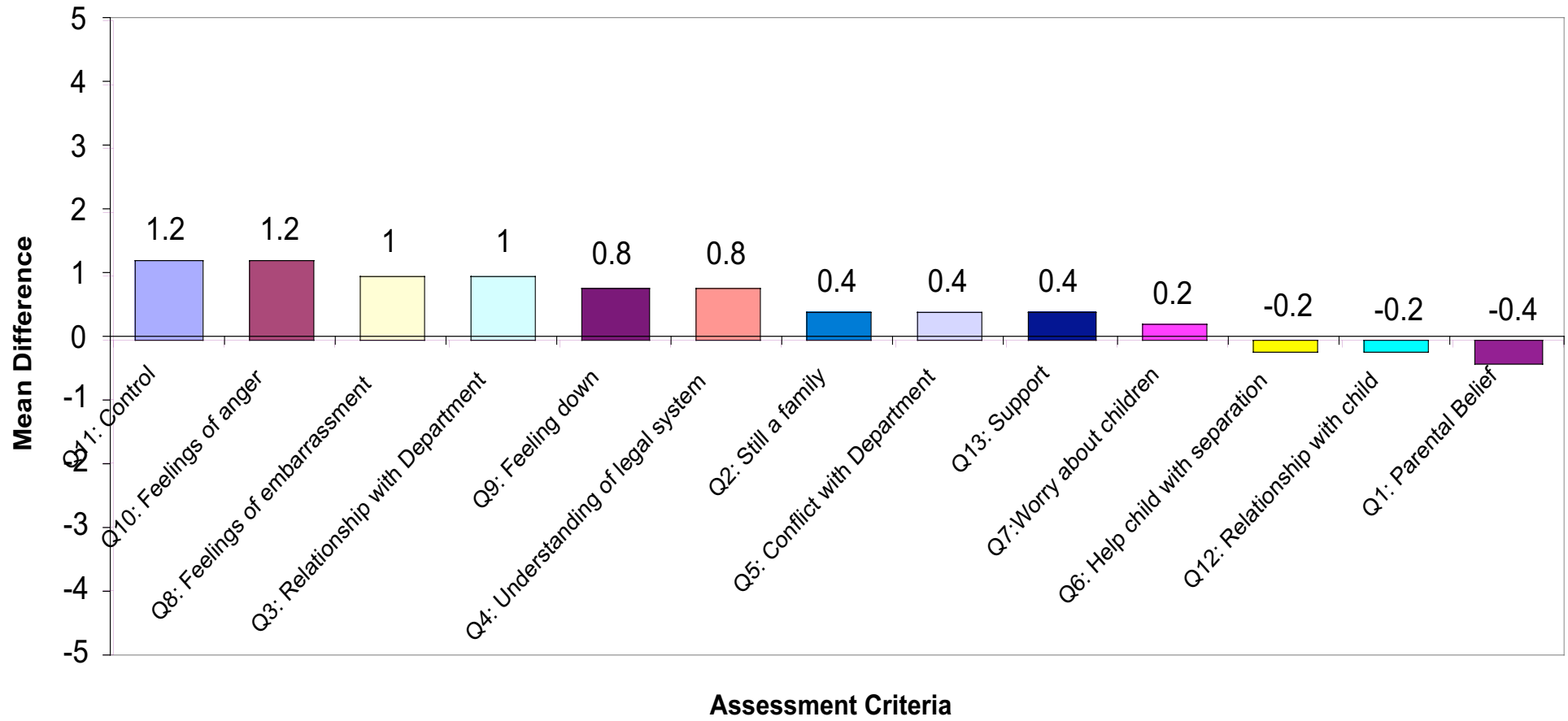


Table II

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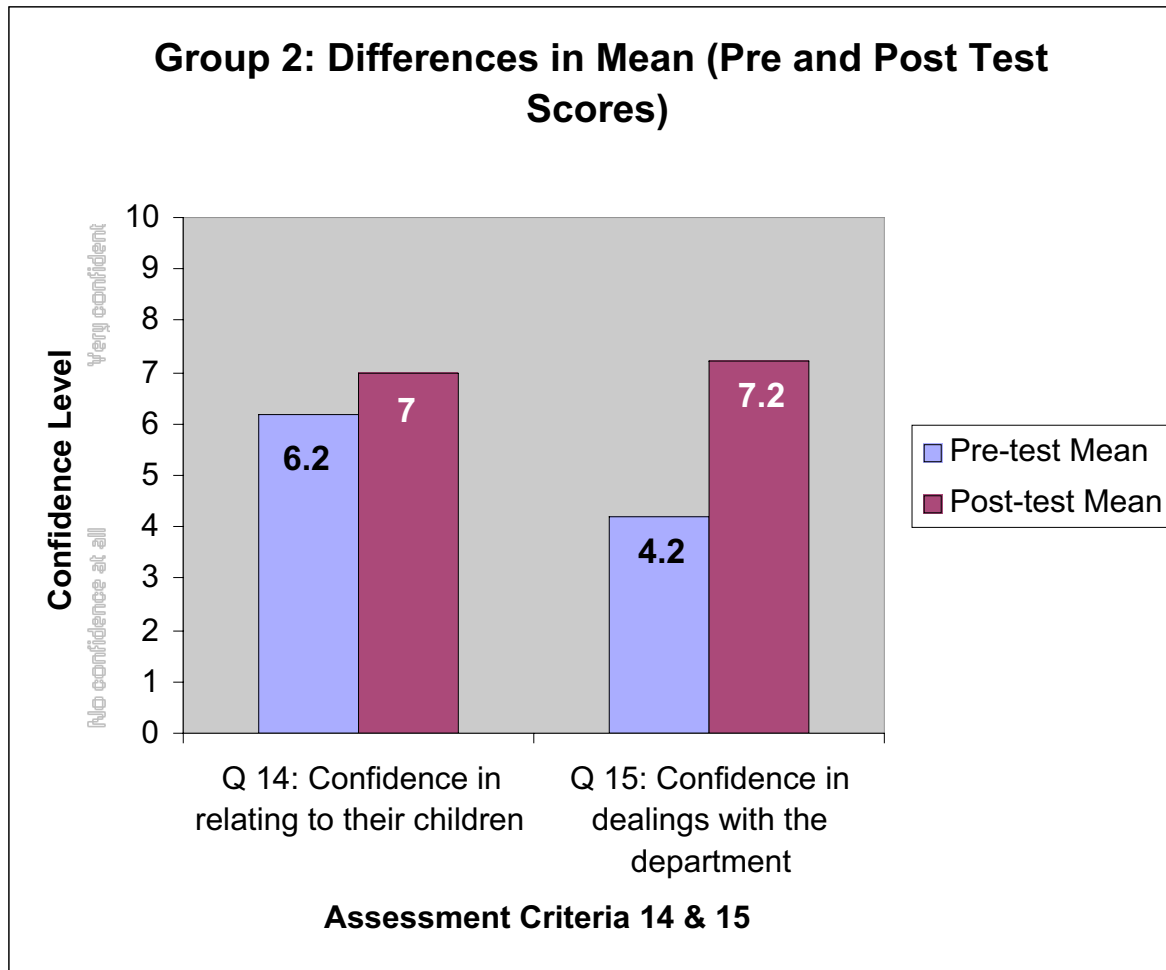


Table III

RESULTS – EVIDENCE OF CHANGE

Post Test Evaluation Results for the First Group

The results of the evaluation measures for the first group as evidenced in Table I all suggest positive change for the participants across all variables. The variables for which participants perceived the most change involved a reduction in the experience of negative feelings surrounding having children in care, specifically:

- Anger
- Depression
- Shame

Additional variables that suggest most change were in relation to:

- Ability to communicate better with their children
- Understanding of the effects separation has on children
- Increased motivation to parent.

Variables which suggest a lower level of positive change were in relation to:

- Understanding of their child's behaviour and needs,
- How to help their child with separation,
- Confidence in being a parent,
- Confidence dealing with Departmental staff,
- Knowledge of how the Departmental and legal systems work
- Where to get support from services if needed.

Pre and Post Evaluation Results for the Second Group

The results in Tables II and III indicated a decrease in the experience of negative feelings associated with having children in statutory care, specifically feelings of :

- Anger
- Embarrassment
- Being down

- Worry

The results for the second group also indicated that parents expressed having or feeling:

- Heightened control over the circumstances surrounding their children being in care
- Less conflict with the Department
- Being better able to work with the Department
- More confidence in dealing with the Department
- More knowledgeable of how the legal and departmental systems work.
- More knowledge of where to get help and support when needed

There were more equivocal results in the area of parent child relations for the second group. While there was a slight improvement in:

- Parents confidence in relating well to their children

There was a decrease in:

- How strong they believe the relationship between themselves and their child was
- Their awareness of how to help their child deal with separation
- Their belief that they could still be a parent to their child despite separation

Discussion of Evaluation Results

Across the evaluation results for both groups the program appeared to achieve the stated goals in most but not all areas, as evidenced by:

- (1) There was a recorded reduction in the negative feelings that parents experienced that were associated with having children in care and living in an out of home situation. Specifically anger, embarrassment, shame, worry and being down
- (2) Parents in the first group indicated having closer relationships with their children and more confidence as a parent. Parents in the second group indicated having a better ability to relate to their children but recorded a decrease in the perceived strength of the relationship with their children and their belief in themselves as a parent.
- (3) The parents showed an increased understanding of the child protection system and were more responsive to working with the department.

The negative result obtained in the second group in the area of strength of relationship with their child/ren may have been influenced by the fact that two weeks prior to the end of the

program and the post test evaluation, one of the couples had one of their adolescent children returned and had been experiencing great difficulty reintegrating and re-parenting the child into the family at the time of the evaluation. This event had severely tested the strength of their relationship with their adolescent child. This may have influenced the result and if so indicates a pre-existing limitation of the program in that assisting parents at the stage of reunification with skills for re-parenting was outside the intended focus and ability of the program.

Participant's opinions about program outcomes

Client Satisfaction

Interviews with parents who participated, indicated that what they found most useful was:

- Practical help with navigating the Child Protection System
- Knowing what they had to do to have their children returned
- Knowing how this could be achieved
- How to participate in family meetings
- Negotiating Contact

Group Facilitators Observations of Characteristics of the Parent Sample

- Parents universally experienced feelings associated with grief and loss, triggered by separation, i.e.-**SHOCK, DISBELIEF, ANGER, SADNESS/DEPRESSION-**

Parental behaviours related to their experience of above mentioned feelings /stages

- ◆ **Shock and anger** - often meant conflictual and revengeful behaviour towards DOC
- ◆ **Sadness/depression** – frequently resulted in being acquiescent and **giving up** on engagement with child and DOC
- ◆ **Acceptance** – Arriving at stage of some acceptance meant they reconnected with their child and worked collaboratively with DOC
- ◆ **Shame and guilt** were present - the fact they were responsible for their child's removal made their grief more difficult. Shame and guilt often-triggered sadness/depression, acquiescence and giving up on remaining connected or reunification.
- ◆ **Anxiety** over the well being of the child, was considerably widespread. Although they may have abused or neglected the child they still loved them and were concerned about them. This further complicated their grief and combined with other negative emotions involved in grief, often created or magnified unrealistic perceptions of how the children were, and negatively distorted their communication with the Department.
- ◆ Parents' **affective distress** interfered with communication. Parents were in inadequate mental and emotional state to talk constructively with DOC officers or address the issues surrounding their children coming into care.
- ◆ Parents were **unskilled and uninformed** about engaging with DOC. They had inadequate communication skills and did not understand what they had to do or what evidence they had to show to get their children back.

- ◆ Frequently parents did not know how to show they could parent or how to negotiate increased contact or movement towards reunification. In general they *did not understand* the casework framework and how the child protection system worked.
- ◆ Parents *felt intimidated* by DOC, Legal System and Foster Carer's. This condition, exacerbated by their guilt, shame and grief, often meant they believed that there was little they could do that could influence their children being returned to them. Parents often expressed they felt they had no right to voice their opinion.

Change for parents varied with length of time child had been in statutory system

Across the time frame of the programs delivery, there appeared to be more change for parents who had a child/ren recently on orders (under one year) than there was for parents who had a child/ren on an order for longer (in excess of a year).

For parents with a child/ren recently entering the system they appeared more likely to experience success in developing skills to work with the DOC than for parents whose child/ren had been in the system longer.

The longer the child/ren had been in care, the more parents were likely to be locked into paths of anger and revenge or giving up, rather than moving to some acceptance and working towards reunification.

Feedback from FSO's who referred parents to the program
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For Parents with child/ren in the statutory system under 12 months

Generally, reports from FSO's were that in relation to parents who had a child/ren in the statutory system for less than 12 months, there was observed improvements

- In parents motivation and skills to parent
- Ability to navigate the system and collaborate with departmental workers within the Casework framework.
- Hastened movement towards reunification. Orders not requiring renewal at end of the initial period. Did not require a further 1 or 2 year Order.
- Increased through put in the system, as children stayed in care for shorter times

For Parents with child/ren in the statutory system in excess of 12 months

There were noted improvements in:

- Re-motivation to parent and reconnect with children.

Additional findings – barriers that impacted on parental participation

- Limited finances of parents often meant that they could not meet the costs associated with transport to and from venue. This was particularly relevant in a small town with poor public transport facilities.

- Parents unable to attend because they had to care for other children
- Parents experiencing problems managing children not in care and living at home with them brought their daily parenting issues into the group discussions. This was particularly relevant in two situations where an adolescent had been returned home.
- Initial social anxiety at joining a group
- Health, drug, alcohol and relationship issues for participants

Factors for consideration that may increase effectiveness of program delivery for participants

- Provision of or funding to assist with child care if parents have other children in their care
- Transport – provision of or subsidy for cost of.
- Concurrent parenting courses to compliment the program
- Concurrent individual counselling or other options e.g. linkage with legal representative to address individual needs
- Methods to initially engage this high need group e.g making the initial personal approaches etc

It is envisaged that *My Family First* may be one of a two program package : the second program providing more practical help in re-parenting skills once the capacity to deal with the emotional aspects of separation, remaining connected to children and working with the statutory child protection system are established through participation in *My Family First*.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the evaluation results indicate that the *My Family First* program has some usefulness in working on negative parental feelings associated with separation and in up-skilling parents to help them better work with the statutory child protection system. These are obstacles which can fracture or completely end the parent child relationship. Conceivably, if these barriers are reduced or removed, the parent child relationship can be allowed to thrive and grow.

Ongoing involvement with some of the families from the first group has allowed us to observe continued growth in parent's relationships with their children. Some examples of this are; one participant has 3 of 4 children previously in care residing with her and is actively involved in work around the eventual reunification of the last child following completion of counselling and some resolution for him of issues associated with previous abuse. Another participant has regular overnight weekend and holiday periods with his children. He has shown marked improvements in his confidence in dealing with Departmental workers, in particular, managing to negotiate and successful participate in planning meetings for his children within the casework

framework. His relationships with the children's foster carer and Departmental case worker are very positive whereas at the time of entering the program they had virtually broken down and were quite hostile. This progress continues 12 months post the completion of the first program. Such outcomes may be indicative that this program can be a catalyst for longer term sustainable positive change for families.

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