

MY FAMILY FIRST
PRESENTATION SUMMARY
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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.

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.

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. Two groups were conducted and evaluated as part of the project delivery, the first consisted of four single parents and the second consisted of two couples and two single parents. There was a 50/50 mixture of parents with children recently removed- (under 12 months) and longer - (over 12 months).

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.

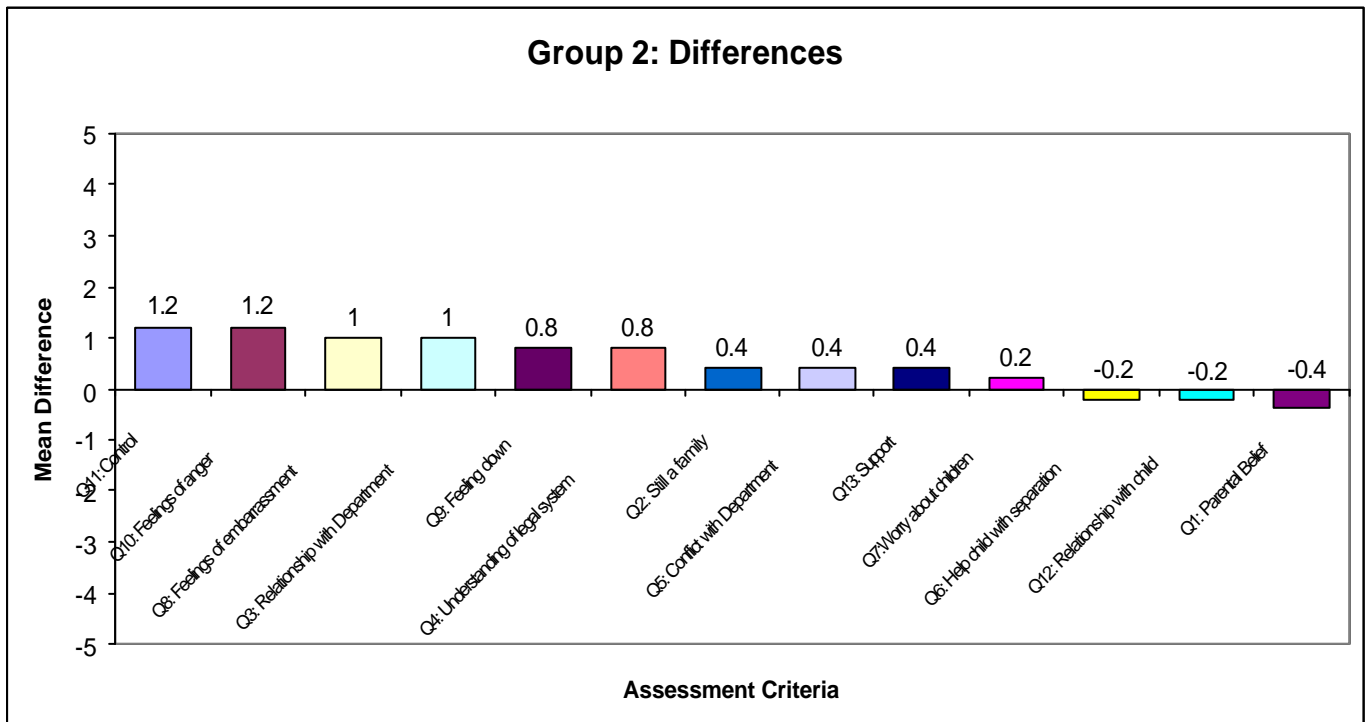
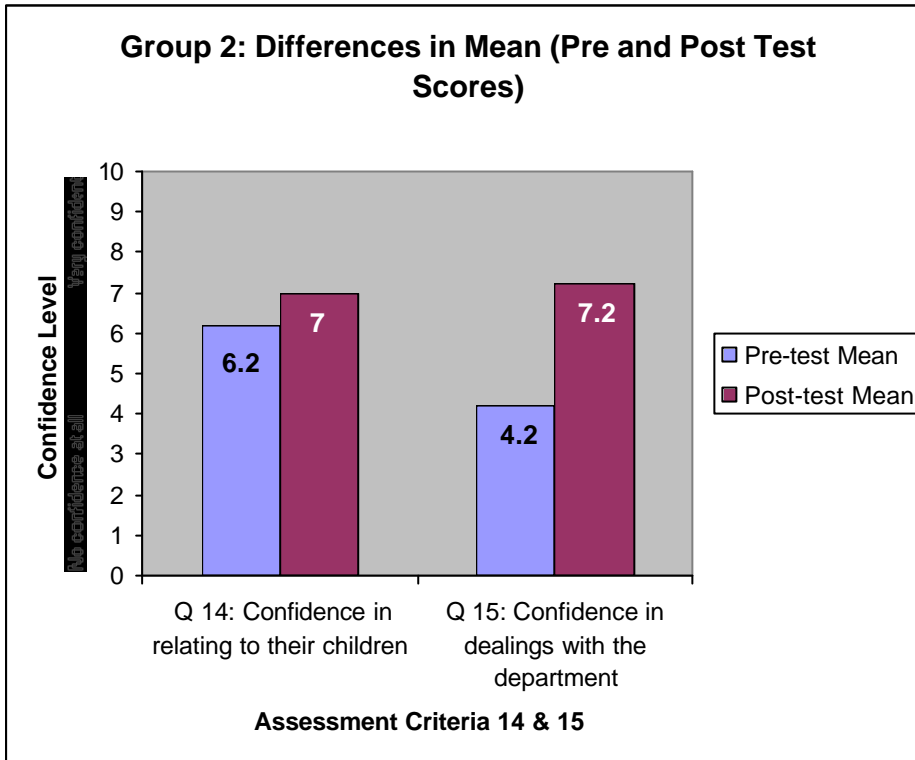
PERCEIVED AIMS & OUTCOMES

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.



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 be 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.

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.

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.

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