

The Potential of “Families Matter” – Then and Now
Revisiting the Original Community Research Background
of
October 2002

9 February 2006

*“Families Matter” – a resource for families working in partnership
with schools to support the well-being of young people.*

The Potential for “Families Matter” – Then and Now:

Revisiting the Original Community Research Background of October 2002

This is one of four linked papers which examine major milestones in the development of the national Families Matter initiative. This paper revisits the original community research conducted with focus groups of parents in school communities across the country, to provide context and input to the design of Families Matter.

1. Background

In 2002 the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) was contracted jointly with the Australian Parents Council (APC) by the federal Department of Health & Ageing (DoHA) to develop and implement a resource for parents around building resilience in their children and young people. ACSSO and APC saw the resource as an opportunity to build partnerships between parents and teachers, schools and home, to train parents to run information and engagement sessions for other parents and families; and to create and provide support links for schools and their communities.

As a threshold process, the ACSSO-APC project management team was required to engage independent consultants to conduct parent focus groups in each State and Territory, and a survey to provide contextual information and input to inform the design and development of the Families Matter resources and processes, and their implementation.

Saulwick Muller Social Research, consultants with extensive proven experience working with school communities, were selected by a tender process to undertake the research in October 2002. Their detailed and comprehensive report provided an extensive range of confirming insights and comments about the issues and challenges which parents confront in seeking to support the well-being and the positive social and emotional development of their children.

2. Key Themes:

- Participants sought a process that would be centred upon providing the opportunity, encouragement and empowerment for parents talking and working with other parents, sharing their experiences – in effect, engaging in a process of significant dialogue about ‘how do you cope with life; and how do you help and support your children to develop positive coping skills’. They also noted that their children’s input is also relevant and valuable, and there should be opportunities for them to engage in the discussion and information exchange.

There were messages from parents and families around the country that they wanted a process that would not be characterised by principals and teachers talking down to parents on a deficit model – many parents felt that principals and teachers are intimidating and authoritarian in their approach: the school provides the context for parents talking with parents. Nor by external academic “experts” talking down at or lecturing parents from a distant academic viewpoint, nor more glossy booklets in formal academic language.

While there was respect for some outstanding inspirational speakers whose relevance and experience was recognised, there was a feeling that they are not really accessible when you need them, and the context they provide only goes so far – *“the practical real-life situation hits home and people like to talk about their issues and the ways they solved them.... Parents are as equipped as anybody to talk about these issues: I’d see them all as being experts”*.

- There were also consistent and strong messages that there should be access to such a program much earlier than the secondary school years, and that it should be made available in at least the later years of primary school. These views were expressed pretty much unanimously from all parents in all focus groups in all parts of the country.

There were many reasons given in support of this view, e.g.:-

- As students approach puberty in latter primary, the issues of adolescence are very much on the horizon for parents, who would be keen to develop awareness and coping skills in preparation;
- In the earlier years parents tend to be more closely in touch with their children than in the teenage years;
- Children in primary school are more likely to encourage their parents' involvement;
- Many parents felt that primary schools are more directly accessible to them and encourage their involvement;
- Such a program could help establish positive patterns of involvement while children are still in their earlier formative years - patterns of involvement that can be sustained and developed into the future.

A few participants also felt that such a program with the proposed inclusive discussion process, was relevant to the needs of young parents as early as pre-school, at a time when being able to talk with and share experiences with others is also very important.

4. From Then - to Now...

Taking up these findings, the processes and supporting materials of "Families Matter" were developed in 2003 and pilot tested in a number of volunteering secondary schools actively engaged in the MindMatters initiative, in early 2004. The strongly positive results reported from a range of these trial schools led to invitations to a wide range of schools in selected cluster areas across the country to participate in the initial roll-out phase in 2004. Nearly 200 schools and their communities took up that invitation in 2004, and a further 130 schools in 2005.

These initial roll-out phases were funded by the Department of Health & Ageing, as with the other elements of the national MindMatters suite of initiatives, to focus on the secondary years of schooling. However, a significant number of school communities participating in "Families Matter" in 2004 and 2005 include both primary and secondary enrolments, and indicate high levels of interest, relevance and engagement from both primary and secondary level families.

Their experience, and the continuing high levels of interest in "Families Matter" from primary school communities across the country, supports the need to extend access to the "Families Matter" resource to the primary schooling years.

"Families Matter" is currently (February 2006) the subject of a major national evaluation, as are all other elements of the MindMatters suite of initiatives, the results of which are intended to inform decisions by the Department as to the future directions, operation, scope and activity level of all aspects of the national program. That final report will be lodged in March 2006 and decisions are intended to be taken and announced by May 2006.

The Department of Health & Ageing has also indicated that they are considering the development in 2006 of a resilience and well-being initiative that will focus on the students and families of primary school years, with planning to commence from early in the school year.

When the national evaluation of “Families Matter” is completed, it is intended to publish the findings as a further discussion paper in this series.

The evaluation is being conducted in the context that the “Families Matter” has operated in schools only since early 2004, and even in school communities who participated in the first stage roll-out, the process is only 18 months old. It is still early days, and it is only beginning to fulfill its potential.

Even at this preliminary stage, the outlook and potential for “Families Matter” is positive. The evaluation is indicating without doubt that the Families Matter concept – with parents talking to other parents - is strongly supported. This initiative has already shown it can make a major impact on resilience and emotional well-being among young people, and bring about positive cultural change in schools, particularly in the relationship between parents and schools.

The defining characteristics of “Families Matter” – which reflect the themes identified in the original research as summarised in the **Attachment** – are what give it a particular appeal and effectiveness.

There certainly appears to be strong and unanimous support among stakeholders and those involved in delivering the program for the concepts and ideals that lie behind it.

The positive experiences of participating school communities demonstrate that the real potential of Families Matter is unlimited!

Attachment: Summary of Main Findings of Focus Group Research – from the Consultants' Report

1. The parents who came to our discussions, although not representative of all parents, are believed to be representative of thoughtful parents who are committed to their children's welfare. They felt qualified to be involved in a program such as Families Matter on condition that the program struck them as being viable and credible. Somewhat paradoxically, credibility would depend on parental involvement. These parents generally would be prepared to be involved in a pilot program but doubted whether others would.
2. There was a low level of awareness about MindMatters. Few had heard of it, and only one participant across the ten groups was able to describe it. This person was on a MindMatters taskforce for her school.
3. We did not attempt to conduct the discussions as therapy sessions or in a way that provoked participants to reveal sensitive information about themselves or their families. Yet often they did so. We are grateful for their honesty and courage. It allowed us to understand, little by little, that many families are beset by real problems which require great care, thoughtfulness and skill if they are to be resolved. In a very real sense, further assistance in one form or another to many families would appear to be essential if the health of the community and of the next generation is to be secured.
4. In bringing up their children our participants have attempted to:
 - stay close to their children and keep the lines of communication open at all times,
 - offer a consistent approach to the parenting and raising of their children,
 - set boundaries for their children's behaviour and to police these boundaries, some rigorously and some not so rigorously,
 - be prepared to move the boundaries as their children got older, sometimes unilaterally, and sometimes in negotiation with their children, and to
 - offer their children unconditional love, be there for them, and stand by them no matter what the circumstances.
5. As may be imagined, these are ambitious goals. Sometimes they have been achieved, sometimes not, but always they remained an aspiration.
6. There are various models of parenting. Some are stricter than others. Which model is selected depends in part on the parents' experience with their own parents, on the relative influence in the household of the mother and the father if they have themselves inherited different models, on the personality of the child and sometimes on the child's gender or on sibling order.
7. It is obvious that parents bring up their children in the culture of the moment. They and their children are influenced by this culture. Some of the parenting tenets listed point 4 above have wide currency. We heard the same points made by parents from different backgrounds in many parts of Australia. Parents approach parenting either with a positive view from their own upbringing or with a resolution to retain the good and discard the bad, or not to repeat the errors they believed they suffered at their parents' hands. In one way or another their own parents and their influence is always with them – sometimes consciously and, as it emerged, sometimes unconsciously.
8. Apart from modelling their parenting behaviour on their own childhood experiences, other sources of information and modelling are also used. These are many: other family members, friends, contacts in the school community, occasional lectures, books, and so on.

9. There are some social situations that are so extreme or aberrant that parents and children are overwhelmingly concerned with survival. Some Aboriginal communities are in this position. In these situations parents are often unable to break the child-rearing patterning they have inherited from their own parents. Violence is one example of this. It is difficult, if not impossible, for these parents to view adolescence separately. They have often either mismanaged their child or lost control before adolescence, or believe that the child's future is so bleak that the particular emotional and other problems of adolescence are dwarfed by the more encompassing problems of the child's physical and social survival.
10. Parents cope with parenting in many ways:
 - Some join their children in mutually acceptable or interesting activities – both inside and outside the home.
 - Some promote an interest in sport or other activities to engage their children and counter potential adverse influences.
 - Some encourage discussion inside the home.
 - Some attempt to make their home an attractive and relaxing social centre for their children and their children's friends.
 - Most attempt to keep the lines of communication open – although they recognise that sometimes they must wait patiently for the line to be connected.
11. In a few cases, they had – to use their own words – “lost it”. This usually meant that communication had broken down to the point where, for a time, they lost their connection with the child, or that some disaster, such as drug abuse or an unwanted pregnancy, occurred. When this happened, they hunkered down, drew on their principles, offered what assistance they could to the child and attempted to wait out the problem. They did not give up.
12. In the main they believe that the inculcation of values – moral, social and ethical – should start early. They believe that by the time adolescence approaches, the framework should be well in place. Some have seen the framework buffeted by the storms of adolescence. They believe that if the framework is well fashioned it will survive these storms, but that if the framework is not robust, it might not. They believe that it is too late to try to build it when the storm is threatening or has already broken.
13. Some parents believe that some of their children have not encountered storms during adolescence. They count themselves and their children lucky if this is the case.
14. Whether they had been as lucky as this or not, most of our respondents were reasonably satisfied with the way their children were growing up. Even those who had had short term difficulties or were battling current problems seemed hopeful that it would come right in the end. None seemed overwhelmed, though some said they lacked confidence. These people were on the lookout for role models and sources of advice.
15. In the world around them, our respondents see family breakdown, economic pressure (both self-induced and externally induced) and the consequent long hours spent by parents at work, selfish parents neglecting their children and their children's needs, the pressure of a commercial and acquisitive society and the advertising which is part of it on their children's consciousness, and recognise these as having a major impact on children.
16. They make the connection between these forces and the social pressures that confront young people in adolescence. Parents see these social pressures as coming mainly from peers, television, the consumer imperative, uncertainty about the future, and sometimes expectations of academic success. They are conscious that all of these are overlaid on the biological changes taking place within the young person.

- On peers: Parents see the pressure to conform, to be fashionable, to behave according to group norms as being strong and more often as being negative rather than positive. They also see this pressure as being more acute among girls rather than boys.
 - On television: They see it as ubiquitous, and presenting unrealistic depictions of body image and material success, and undesirable models of social values and behaviour.
 - On the consumer imperative: Again they see this as affecting girls more than boys and as finding its most common expression in the demand for designer-label clothing and other accessories.
 - On uncertainty about the future: Parents see young people as being forced to make career choices too early, despite the belief of some that their children will experience perhaps five or six career changes in their life.
 - On biological changes: On the whole these parents were sensitive to the changes taking place in their children's bodies, and attempted to assist them by open and timely advice. This marked a significant departure from their own adolescence experience. Parents regarded this pressure source as acute and one that it lay within their power to ameliorate.
17. Some parents spoke of pressures that seemed to originate within the children themselves – as though their personality forced them to assert their independence, and thus to charter their own path. There were also pressures brought about by difficulties such as dyslexia and attention-deficit disorder.
18. After listening to parents talk over the course of this research, we came to realise that almost all of them, to some degree or other, saw the raising of children as hazardous. It was as though the children were walking through a jungle in which the wild cats of peer pressures, alcohol, dangerous sex, aberrant pressures, social tensions, and an uncertain future were all prowling. The parents were often torn: they wanted to help their children achieve independence, they wanted to widen the boundaries for discretionary behaviour as the children matured and got older, and yet they wanted to protect them. They also recognised that total protection was impossible. In the end they just hung on, some deciding to err on the side of strict control and some on the side of tolerance, waiting for the time when their children would emerge from the jungle into the comparatively safe sunlight of adulthood.
19. There was widespread though not unanimous support in principle for the concept of a “Families Matter” program, and there was ambivalence as well. This ambivalence had a number of different origins:
- Some parents were confident that they did not need help. These were a minority.
 - Some were worried that, to participate fully, they would need to talk about sensitive matters concerning their child, and that to do this in the school community or in the school environment could violate their children's privacy. This they were not prepared to contemplate.
 - Some felt that by the time children reached adolescence it was too late. Many of these parents said or implied that parents could benefit from continuous education – from the time their children were very young right through to late adolescence. They further implied that if this were attempted, involvement might, over time, become the norm, and the problems of non-acceptance and non-attendance might gradually recede.
 - Many felt that parents who most needed the program were least likely to avail themselves of it. Some, they thought, were too busy making a living. Others were seen as too uninterested in their children. Yet others were believed to lack the necessary confidence – it was felt that they would be too threatened by the school environment, by the presence of others, by the need to contribute and by the need to reveal problems or even to be introspective.
 - Some felt that it was only when a crisis arose that the ordinary run of parents would be prepared to come.

A limited number were enthusiastic about such a program. They would attend, and hoped that others would. They were not too optimistic about its ability to attract the majority of parents.....