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Keeping them in mind: Considering families in work with vulnerable young people



Institute of Child Protection Studies

Snapshot

- Family as protective
 - Family as risk
 - Family as a resource
 - Family as a partner
 - Family centred practice
 - Family aware practice
- Acknowledgments



Who is family?

- Can mean different things to different young people at different times
- Generally adults and other children that surrounded the child during their development and with whom they have developed attachments
- Own children / “new family”



Family as protective

- Family can provide:
 - Belonging
 - Feelings of love and respect
 - A foundation on which to grow and develop
 - Opportunities to develop proactive problem solving skills
 - Clear boundaries and expectations

“Each child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her.”
(Bronfenbrenner 1986)

- These can protect against:
 - Poor mental health
 - Engagement with juvenile justice
 - Early school leaving
 - Early use of AOD
 - Homelessness
- Can mitigate the affects of other risk factors
- Family can still help protect children even when they are not living with them

(Resnick 1996)

Family support

- *The reason I'm so strong is because of my Mum. My Mum helped us go through lots of hard stuff. My Dad was never around so there's no one else. Family's what gets you through*

Family prevents homelessness



- *My family has given me heaps of support over the past few years... They've always been there for me. People say that they have to go to a refuge cos their parents won't take em. It's cool that my parents are always there for me.*

The hope of family

- *Even though things were bad at home and I had to leave you know, you've got that bond. They're there. You have this longing, you know, to be with them for things to get better to be a family again. So even though you're all 'fuck 'em', they mean something to you and people need to know that. Build on that. And you kinda hope they [your family] feels the same.*

Own family as protective

- *Having a kid – makes you think different about stuff. I don't wanna get caught up in stuff so I can be there with him, be a good role model...*
- *I know what a shit life is like and I'm going to make sure my son doesn't have to go through that. I'm going to be a better parent because I'm totally committed to making sure he has a better life than me*

Family conflict and interpersonal problems can be 'normal'

- Adolescence can be a time of strain as the YP begins to develop a concept of self that is separate from their parent-child relationship, their family and prior concepts.
- Stress & storm theories suggest that this is developmentally appropriate (and potentially necessary)
- *Role of the system is to enable stability and support families to support themselves?*

Family as risk

- Childhood experiences of homelessness
- Childhood experience of abuse or neglect
- Placement in out of home care & aging out of care
- Parental AOD
- Domestic Violence
- Parental incarceration
- Family disconnectedness



Intergenerational homelessness

- *“That’s where it all started, man. I was homeless for like 10 years because my Mum had nowhere to stay. Yeah, she went back to my stepfather’s but I couldn’t do it. If Mum had got somewhere where we could be together and she didn’t have to put up with his crap then I wouldn’t’ve ended up where I did. Yeah – my whole life’s caught up with it. All the shit that’s happened in my life is because of it. Everything.” (Young man, aged 21)*

Own family as risk?

- *Yeah, its fucked you know. My girl had somewhere to stay with our kid and that was all good cos, you know, the baby was still small and needed somewhere to stay, right. But I had to sleep on the street to be near 'em, hey. Cos I got into a refuge but it was on the other side of town and it was too far, you know. I love 'em so much I couldn't bare being that far away from 'em – especially just after he was born. So I slept on a bench, in the cold. But it was worth it.*

What do we know about family?

- *I went to heaps of youth services: refuges, centres, programs. No one ever really asked about what was going on at home. I think they just assumed that things were shit and that I couldn't live at home. They didn't really have much of an idea about why things were bad and what needed fixing. If they'd sussed it out, maybe things could've been worked out and I could've gone back home. But they never asked and I never knew that there was stuff that they could do. What a waste!*

- *It really pissed me off that workers tried to connect with me by paying out my Mum. "How could anyone ever give up a kid like you?". That was fucked. She just didn't have the skills, you know. And fuck them that they didn't ask about that and fuck them that they paid her out and fuck them that tried to use her as a way to get to me. How do they work with families? They make things worse!!*

Family as resource

- Family can be one of the most basic but essential assets a young person can have.

Considering family (or the lack of it)

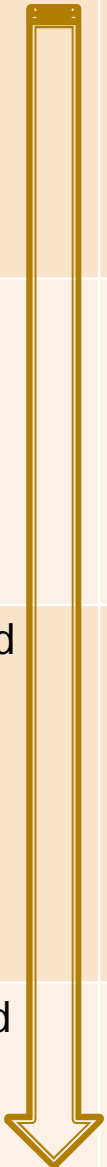
- How do we reconcile families?
- How do we build upon existing family bonds?
- How do we enable family cohesiveness?

- Can we keep families in the centre even when they're not present?

- How do we provide young people with alternative resources and opportunities now and into the future?
- How do we play 'catch up' for young people who haven't experienced family?

Family as partner

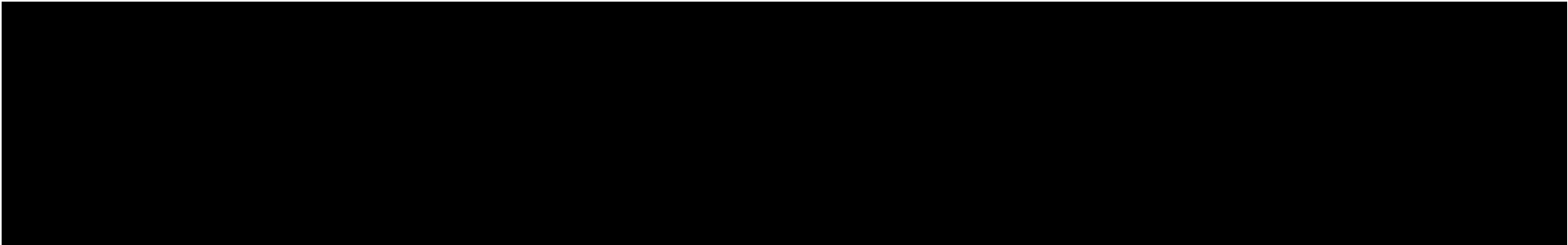
Model	Characteristics
Professionally-centred	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families are seen mostly as deficient and incapable of healthy functioning without professional interventions • Professionals see themselves as experts who determine family needs • Families views and opinions are given little or no credence • Interventions are implemented by professionals with families being passive participants in the intervention process
Family allied	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families are seen as minimally capable of independently affecting changes in their lives • Families are viewed as agents and professionals for carrying out professionally-prescribed recommendations and courses of action • Professionals enlist families to implement intervention under their guidance and tutelage
Family-focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families are seen as capable of making choices among options professionals deem important for healthy functioning • Professionals provide advice and encouragement to families on the basis of their choices and decisions • Interventions focus on monitoring family use of professionally-valued services
Family-centred	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families are viewed as fully capable of making informed choices and acting on their own choices • Professionals view themselves as agents of families who strengthen existing skills and promote the acquisition of new skills • Interventions emphasise the capacity-building, resources and support



Moore & Larkin,
2005, p15-16)

Family aware practice (Robinson & Pryor 2006)

1. Physical and psychological safety for young people and their family members takes priority.
2. Early developmental experiences, including attachment relationships and traumatic events, have a significant influence on young people's ongoing development.
3. There are key protective factors in the family domain that help to promote a young person's health and wellbeing that need to be considered within the context of effective youth work.
4. Relationships between a young person and their family need to be considered within the scope of age-appropriate developmental behaviour.

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5. Workers have an important but relatively brief role in the lives of young people and families, and as such have a responsibility to identify and/or facilitate more enduring relationships.
 6. Family-aware practice communicates the message that families can and should be part of the solution in the majority of circumstances.
 7. The right to privacy and confidentiality must be treated with the utmost respect for both families and young people, whilst recognising that communication between young people and their families is an important component of connectedness.
 8. A family's cultural background is a valuable aspect of its identity, and cultural sensitivity and understanding are paramount when working with young people and their families

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