

What Works with ultra high-risk families: A comparative process evaluation of four community agencies providing home visitation child abuse prevention services

Those involved: Family Help Trust, Christchurch (FHT); Family Services Whanganui Trust (FSSWT); Family Service Centre (Papakura) (FSC) – Great Potentials Trust, Auckland; He Matapuna Ora Charitable Trust, Family Start Nelson (FS). All agencies have a reputation for continually striving for excellence and have strong local support and credibility.

Purpose: This project is a national joint collaborative research initiative that intends to conduct a comparative study of work effectiveness with ultra high-risk families in multiple sites. The aim is to enhance quality of service delivery in home visitation services for families, whanau.

Intended Deliverables:

- *To identify worker practices and competencies which work most effectively with hostile, difficult, hard to reach, multi-problem families.*
- *Based on qualitative data gathered, to develop a type of quality assurance check list that assists with recruitment, retention and quality of service delivery.*
- *To publish and widely distribute the findings in a Best Practice Manual*
- *In put into social work training curriculums*
- *Use results to influence policy, research and child protection (both state and the NGO sector) in the defining and implementing effective home visiting services*

Why conduct this study? The four agencies involved, believe that it is in the public interest to understand more fully how to engage and work effectively with this particularly high-risk group of families. We are not aware of any similar studies in New Zealand and while the NZ Council of Social Services³ has examined effective practice in some of their preventive services, this study has not identified the personal traits and characteristics of the helping relationship but rather the philosophical frameworks and values that staff adhere to.

Most research is on the efficacy of specific interventions, not the relationship which is the vehicle of the intervention.¹ Research in counselling and psychotherapy has confirmed the long-held social work belief that the quality of a helping relationship is one of the most important determinants of client outcome.² A comparative study of worker effectiveness with ultra high-risk families will be supported by NGO staff who are committed to service excellence. Small, collaborative teams in NGO's are in a better position to explore sensitive practice issues

Proposal: The spread of the selected agencies offers two north island, two south island and within this, two city and two regionally based client populations. While the research design is still in its development phase, it is expected that a homogenous sample of 10 clients from each agency (40), meeting a strict high-risk criteria would be selected for interviews by the research team. Alongside of this would also be interviews with approximately 27 agency personnel, predominantly social work field staff, but also including managers and clinical supervisors.

Background to intended study: FHT and FSSWT are both affiliated to Jigsaw (NZ) Family Services, a national body comprising of independent organizations whose primary focus is the wellbeing and protection of children. Jigsaw is the primary voice for child abuse prevention in NZ. The Managers of FHT and FSSWT are on the board of Jigsaw, and as a result of their joint commitment to evidence-based practice and service effectiveness, in 2006 acquired the funds from The Todd Foundation to conduct a series of exchange visits to critique and examine each others' social work practice. The final report titled "Best Practice Guidelines" has been published and widely distributed. This project

³ *Effective Practice in Preventive Services: Six NZCCSS member case studies. April 2006*

¹ *Professor Dorothy Scott. Child Protection: Finding the Way Forward: ACCAN Conference 2007*

² *Horvath 2001; The Alliance. Psychotherapy, 38. Lambert & Ogles 2004; The efficacy and effectiveness of psychotherapy)*

provided the catalyst for FHT and FSSWT to search for further answers to the questions raised from the 2006 Todd report; this time including consumer voice.

Funding: It is expected that the project will cost in the region of \$300,000 including publication and dissemination of the findings. We would seek collaborative funds from private, government and corporate sources and already have a commitment from Contact Energy for \$30,000. The length of the project is unlikely to go beyond a twelve-month period, but does not intend to commence without the full commitment of funds. Included in the budget is compensation back to each agency to enable active participation in this project.

Partnership: We are seeking partnership and supportive relationships with appropriate bodies in order to gain, not just the required funds, but also input into the design of the questionnaires together with communication and marketing advice, all of which are vital components that will ensure a successful venture.

Conclusion: State sector and community child protection and family support services, both nationally and internationally, are struggling to find solutions to child maltreatment and child homicide. This study has the potential to play an important role in assisting this search for answers.

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