

Adopting a strengths approach in child care services

By Jan McFarlane

A strengths approach framework

Rather than being a service delivery model, the 'strengths approach' is a framework or set of beliefs and values that guide practice within an organisation. At its core is the idea that 'whether or not we are aware of them or appreciate them, we all have strengths and capacities that can help transform our lives' (Mallucio, 1981 in McCashen, 2005, p.7). Pioneered in Australia by St. Luke's in Bendigo, Victoria, and Wayne McCashen, the strengths approach describes a way of working with children, families and communities in a range of different contexts.

The beliefs and values which underpin the strengths based framework are consistent with current thinking about best practice in child care. These include the concepts that:

- children are active and powerful learners, with many strengths and abilities;
- families are the 'experts' in their children's lives. They bring invaluable information about children's interests, strengths and abilities to the child care service;
- child care professionals bring to the service a wealth of knowledge, skill and experience which can be shared with families and their colleagues to enhance the care and experiences provided for children; and
- practice is guided by principles of inclusion, participation, consultation, collaboration and shared decision making.



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1-1.5 and 6.2

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1-1.3, 2.1-2.3, 3.1-3.3 and 5.3

QIAS Principles: 1.1-1.6 and 2.1-2.3

Using a strengths approach in daily practice

Sometimes it can be challenging to work with a particular child or group of children, with some families, or even with certain colleagues. When this happens, it is easy to become focused on what is 'wrong' with the other person and their 'failures'. This makes it difficult to recognise and appreciate that the other person also has strengths and abilities.

A strengths approach offers a new perspective, a different way to look at challenging situations, that says:

- the problem is the problem; the person is not the problem;
- people have good intentions; and
- they are doing the best they can. (McCashen, 2005)

This does not mean that concerns are ignored. It means that the focus is shifted from what is 'wrong' and what is 'not working' to what 'has potential' and what 'is working'. From this perspective it is possible to think about solutions to a problem that build upon what is already working well.

Creating a strengths based culture

The service's philosophy is a written statement describing the values and beliefs that are important to children, families, child care professionals and management. It provides an opportunity for everyone in the service to explain how they think about children, families and their colleagues and to outline the type of child care experience that they want to create. Therefore, the service philosophy is an ideal place to begin the service's commitment to a strengths approach by demonstrating:

- a respect for people's dignity, rights, differences and similarities;

- a belief in people and their potential;
- a commitment to sharing power and resources;
- a commitment to honesty and openness; and,
- a commitment to inclusion and shared decision making.

Creating a strengths based culture involves putting the philosophy into practice in every aspect of the service.

The significance of language to a strengths approach

Language creates meaning and therefore the language used by child care professionals in their daily interactions is important. The way child care professionals talk about children, families, their colleagues and their work influences their ideas, which in turn can influence their attitude and interactions.

When children are continually described as 'attention seeking', 'uncontrollable' or 'aggressive', or families are described as 'dysfunctional', 'uninterested' or 'fussy', these terms quickly become labels which define them. If they hear these labels often enough both children and adults learn to see themselves in that light. Similarly, when staff and carers are continually labelled as 'the untrained' or as a family day care 'mum' they can be marginalised and perceive themselves as having nothing of value to contribute.

When a person's behaviour or status becomes the focus of attention, it is hard to notice or appreciate their strengths. It is also easier to blame them or other people for problems.

Tackling a challenge from a strengths perspective makes it possible to separate the person or group from the challenging behaviour or issue. Changing the focus, so that the label is put aside,



makes it easier to remember that the problem involves a 'child', a 'family' or a 'child care professional' with positive qualities and abilities, as well as some behaviours or issues that are cause for concern.

By recognising that 'the problem is the problem' and 'the person is not the problem' the options for dealing with the situation become clearer. It is easier to think about times when the issue or concerning behaviour is not present and to consider why this is the case. It helps to highlight strategies that have worked in the past, and focus attention on how these strategies can be used again, or built upon in response to the current situation.

Promoting partnerships with families through a strengths approach

When a family is struggling with a child rearing problem or a colleague is experiencing difficulty, it is very easy to give advice or impose a view about what needs to be done without considering the other person's unique

Changing the focus of attention using a strengths approach

The...	is...	who...
attention seeking child	a child	seeks support from adults as a way of coping with being in child care
uncontrollable child	a child	is having difficulty managing their own feelings and behaviour
dysfunctional family	a family	is experiencing difficult life circumstances
uninterested family	a family	has competing priorities
untrained worker	a child care professional	has no formal training
day care 'mum'	a child care professional	cares for children in a home environment



circumstances. The specialist knowledge, skills and experience child care professionals bring to their service are important but, even with the best of intentions, they can send a message that the 'professional knows best'. This may undermine the confidence and the ability of the other person to work things out for themselves and stifles a valuable opportunity for meaningful learning and growth.

Approaching each situation with an open mind and genuine curiosity rather than assuming to have all the answers can help the other person to reflect on the problem, discover their own strengths and work out a plan of action for themselves. They are much more likely to experience a real sense of achievement and greater satisfaction than if someone else solves the problem for them.

A strengths approach encourages, supports and demonstrates a willingness to work together to resolve an issue. It requires more listening than talking, and asking what do 'you think', rather than starting each sentence with 'I'. A practical way of ensuring that language conveys a strengths approach is to turn statements into questions, for example:

Statement	Question
This will help you...	What would help you...?
You should...	Have you considered...?
I know that...	Could you tell me about...?
I want you to...	What would you like...?

A snapshot of strengths based practice supporting partnerships

James is twelve months old, and has just started attending family day care. The carer has been with the scheme for a number of years and has cared for many babies and toddlers.

Both James and his mother Julie find separation difficult. James cries and clings to Julie, who is anxious and seems uncertain about whether she should go or stay.

The carer invites Julie to stay with James in the morning and asks what would make her feel more comfortable about separating from James. Julie says that she would feel better if she did not have to rush off and leave him crying.

Julie decides that she will arrive earlier in the morning so that she can spend some time with James before she has to leave. Julie had mentioned a favourite book of James and commented that they read it together at home often. The carer asks Julie if she thinks the book might help James with the settling in process, and whether Julie thinks it would be helpful to establish a 'goodbye' routine.

Julie and the carer agree that Julie will read the book with James each morning and that, when she is ready to go, the carer will take James to the window to wave goodbye.

Although the carer has had more experience of children's separation anxiety than Julie, she avoids being the 'expert' in this situation. Instead she works with Julie to determine a strategy to ease the anxiety about separating in the morning. She recognises that Julie has lots of information about James and the things he enjoys (a strength). Together they conclude that reading a familiar book could help James to settle. Together they also build on his new skill of waving goodbye (a strength) to establish a parting routine.

The carer's response ensures that Julie's feelings are validated and that she has some choice and control over what happens for her child. As a result of this encounter Julie is more likely to share information and to work in partnership with the carer in the future.

Team building using a strengths approach

The daily challenges of working in a child care service sometimes leave child care professionals feeling overwhelmed. When morale is low it can be hard to remember the good things about the job, such as the shared vision and the things that are being achieved for children and their families.

A strengths based culture creates a service environment where child care professionals feel accepted, valued and respected. It is an environment where knowledge, skills and experience are recognised, decisions are made collaboratively and enthusiasm and initiative are rewarded. When time is taken to share individual and team achievements with all stakeholders, child care professionals are able to see how the work they are doing contributes to what is being achieved at the service. It sends a clear message that their work is important and that it matters.

Conclusion

Creating a strengths culture in a child care service means taking a strengths perspective in every aspect of practice, including service policies, management practices and relationships.

Working in a way that acknowledges and values the strengths each stakeholder brings to the service, and focusing on what is working rather than what is not, makes it possible to see potential rather than problems. It is an approach that allows new possibilities to emerge ■

A snapshot of strengths based practice supporting team building

Chris is the new coordinator of an outside school hours care service. The previous coordinator retired after being with the service for 15 years. She was highly regarded by the staff, families and children using the service.

Chris is concerned about team morale and the way in which some team members are responding to daily issues at the service. They appear to be dwelling on the past and using the former coordinator's retirement as the cause for anything that goes wrong. They say "that wouldn't have happened if Jo was here" and "Jo would have known what to do about that".

Chris recognises that the staff miss the former coordinator and will need time to adjust to his different leadership style. He also believes that by focusing on the strengths individual staff bring to the service he might help them to see the centre differently and to focus their attention on the future.

The staff use a daily diary to note information that needs to be shared with staff on duty in the next session. Chris decides to use this as a place to acknowledge the things individual staff and the team are doing well; showing a new child and her family round the service; introducing a new game or activity, successfully mediating in a dispute between two children; introducing new foods for afternoon tea. He also starts each team meeting by focusing on what is going well and what has been achieved since the last meeting.

References and further reading

- Benevolent Society, Lady Gowrie Child Centre & Families NSW. (2007). *Sharing the learning: strengths based practice in children's services newsletter*, Issues 1-4. Sydney: NSW Government.
- McCashen, W. (2005). *The strengths approach: a strengths-based resource for sharing power and creating change*. Bendigo, Victoria: St. Luke's Innovative Resources.
- McCashen, W. (2003). Using a strengths approach in family day care. *Jigsaw*, Issue 36, pp. 17-18.
- Roffey, S. (2007). Behaviour, belief and action. *Every Child*, 13 (2) pp. 16-17. Watson, ACT: Early Childhood Australia Inc.
- Silberberg, S. (2004). Our scrapbook of strengths: a resource to unveil the strength of staff, parents & children. *Reflections*, Issue 17, pp.16-17. NSW: National Gowrie RAP Consortium.
- Young, M. (2007). Strength based – family centred approach: supporting change in children's services. *Reflections*, Issue 29, pp.16-18. NSW: National Gowrie RAP Consortium.

Useful websites

- St Luke's Anglicare: www.stlukes.org.au
- St Luke's Innovative Resources: www.innovativeresources.org