

# WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH FAMILIES: STRENGTHS-BASED WORK – THE KEY TO SUSTAINABLE FAMILY WELL-BEING

## Authors

(© 1998. DO NOT REPRODUCE WITHOUT EXPRESS WRITTEN PERMISSION OF THE AUTHORS)

Professor Robyn Munford

Ms Jackie Sanders

The research undertaken by the Barnardos Child and Family Research Centre in partnership with the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Massey University and cited in this text was made possible by a series of research contracts from the Foundation for Research Science and Technology's Public Good Science Fund. The Barnardos Child and Family Research Centre and Massey University gratefully acknowledges this ongoing support from The Foundation and the recognition it gives to the importance of building our understanding of the factors which enhance whanau/family well-being.

## Introduction

Over the past 6 years, the Barnardos Child and Family Research Centre, in conjunction with Massey University School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work has explored issues around family well-being and family change. As part of this broad research programme, we have focused in some depth upon home-based family support services, and in particular upon the Barnardos Family Support Service. This article draws together some of the key findings from this research programme as they relate to the key characteristics of effective family support services. Our research has clearly highlighted the importance of strengths-based support work in the achievement of sustainable family change. This article foregrounds strengths-based support work and explores the ways in which these principles can be applied in concrete practice situations.

## Key Principles which Underpin Strengths-based Family Support

A number of important principles underpin effective client support work. One of the characteristics that differentiates the support provided by a formal agency from the support provided from within an individual's own network is the emphasis upon not seeking to control decision-making processes. Aside from the fact that to do otherwise would risk the creation of client dependency, it is important to continually reinforce the right of client and family to control their own destiny if the goals of support are to be realised. Therefore, effective support work recognises that support workers are temporary visitors into the lives of clients and that the least disruption possible should occur through the process of support. Seeing clients or families as partners in the change process and having much to contribute to the creation of change, therefore, is key principle that underpins successful support work. Intervention work is an aid to family change. The primary objective of effective support work is to enhance client and family ability to make decisions and find

solutions to the challenges they face. Therefore, the family must be allowed, if at all possible, to maintain its own integrity and to remain in control of the process of change. As one client in our research programme noted:

Yeah, she left it up to me. But if I was stuck on anything, she would have a suggestion and it was up to me what I did with those suggestions.

Interviewer: Why was it important that she didn't take those decisions away from you?

If she had taken the decisions away from me it would have reinforced the fact that I was useless (Munford et. al., 1998:77).

The workers we interviewed identified that clients often found themselves in the position where they had little control over what had happened to themselves and their children up to the point of contacting Barnardos. Workers clearly identified that one of the important things that they could do was to provide a safe context in which clients could re-learn effective decision-making and solution finding strategies. They also identified that clients frequently needed support to re-learn to trust their own judgements and instincts. The support provided by the agency enabled clients to develop confidence in themselves and their choices and from this point they began to create major changes in the effectiveness of their parenting. This in turn resulted in significant improvements in their overall quality of life. This process, although sometimes time consuming, changed clients from passive to active participants in their own life course and in the change creation process.

Some supportive relationships are established under statutory orders, and this can add external accountability requirements that will influence the nature of decision-making and partnership that can be achieved within the support relationship. Even in such situations, however, the principles of valuing the contribution of all individuals and allowing their perspectives to be heard can occur. The significance of seeing clients as colleagues or partners lies in the fact that any lasting solutions will flow from active rather than passive decision-making by client and family.

In order to see clients as partners in the change process, it is necessary that workers are able to approach them from a position of unconditional positive regard. Rogers (1951) developed the concept of unconditional respect as an important reference point when working with clients. This principle recognises the need to take account of several important factors when engaging in client or family-related support work. Firstly, it recognises that an intervention is, at the end of the day, a relationship between human beings. If it is to be a successful relationship, then the 'rules' that apply to successful relationships must also apply to the worker's approach to the intervention. Related to this, is the recognition that respect and trust are vital components of successful interventions (as they are of successful relationships) and must be established between the client and worker if support is going to contribute to change. In short, people are unlikely to attempt major changes in their lives if they experience a lack of respect and do not feel they can trust their support person.

The principle of unconditional positive regard and its role with support work recognises that many clients and families seek support because they have quite serious unmet emotional needs or because relationships have failed them in the past. They may not have experienced successful and nurturing relationships. The development of the intervention must recognise that the client and family may need to re-learn relationship-building skills, and before they can do this, they will need to experience a positive, nurturing relationship themselves. The support relationship, if carefully managed, can give clients and families this sort of experience. From this base they can then learn new skills that they can use in their own relationships. Our research identified that unconditional positive regard emphasised honesty and openness with clients and a nonjudgmental approach to the interaction. It referred to a position of total respect for the client and the issues they confronted. It also separated the individual from their actions. This meant that the individual could be valued at all times, while their behaviour might not always be condoned. Staff noted that in many situations this would be the first time anyone had accorded the client respect and treated them with dignity. A worker explained her approach to work with clients.

Very non-judgmental and that is an absolute must, you know by respecting them for what they are, where they are and how they are, all that at that time. What else do I do? Treat them as I would wish to be treated myself, and expect to be treated actually (Munford et. al., 1998:67).

During interviews, staff talked of genuinely liking the clients they worked with. Interviews with clients highlighted the fact that they were clearly communicating this to clients. Further, and more importantly, the fact that workers did like their clients was a very important dimension of the support relationship, from the perspective of the clients. The approach to relationship building, modelling of ways of relating to others and addressing issues, and the provision of emotional support all revolve around the philosophy of unconditional respect:

Staff commented that clients had not often experienced relationships that provided them with this safety and support prior to coming to the service. Similarly, clients noted, often with surprise, that they felt genuinely valued and liked for themselves by their worker. The support relationship, then, was particularly intense for clients and because of this, it provided a medium within which emotional issues could be addressed. A worker talked of the need one client had to address wider emotional issues first:

For me to come and work with this particular woman, I have set, I have come with the intention of just letting her bombard me with the thoughts and the feelings and her hurt and her pain and we'll go from there. Because I feel that once she has been able to express these things and be OK with feeling the way the she feels, things will fall into place (Munford et. al., 1998:67).

Scott and O'Neil (1996) address the principle of unconditional respect within the context of family preservation services. Their work addresses the need to see clients as capable, committed to the needs of their families and children and as being in the best position to identify those support strategies that work most effectively for them (ibid:32). They link their view of unconditional respect with a view that sees

clients as colleagues and partners. Unconditional respect does not imply passive acceptance of all actions and attitudes of clients and families. Rather, it involves:

Validating the other person's feelings and accepting the person's view of the relationship between his or her beliefs, behaviour and the outcomes [this] frees the worker to have an insight into the behaviour without needing to condone it (Scott and O'Neil, 1996:54).

Enabling and empowering principles are also important components of effective support work. Dunst et al., (1988)

provides some clarification of what this often used word can mean in family work:

[enablement involves] creating opportunities for ALL (emphasis theirs) family members to display and acquire competencies that strengthen family functioning (Dunst et. al., 1988:x).

We use the term empowerment to refer to a process by which families are supported to develop mastery over their lives. Such mastery creates a sense of self-determination and is premised upon the belief that all families have the ability to make their own decisions and further that they have a right to be supported to do so if necessary. This includes the knowledge and acceptance of the family's own strength and ability to determine priorities and to define (given that the safety and emotional and physical needs of all members are met) its own way of being as a family.

Key components of empowerment and enablement practice:

- \_\_\_that the family maintains control and defines priorities and styles for family life
- \_\_\_that support work is facilitative rather than directive

Empowerment highlights the significance of placing control clearly in the hands of the family. While the processes through which support work will proceed as it seeks to enhance the level of client and family empowerment may be long and complex, the ultimate goal of work, and thus one fundamental premise for services that seek to support family change, is the empowerment of families. Clients seeking the support of agencies to make changes in the nature of family life will often believe that they have neither control nor mastery over their lives. Building confidence and commitment to a sense of self and adopting a style of family life that belongs to that family are key ways in which client and family empowerment is achieved. The purpose of the support work is to provide maximum opportunities for the advancement and development of client strengths and competencies, and to do this in such a way that the presence of the support worker becomes unnecessary as soon as practicable. The amount of support and the time taken to reach this point of closure will vary markedly given different client situations. By informing all interactions, these two principles provide the driving force that will move interventions steadily forward to a natural conclusion. These two principles require that workers ask of themselves, "What is it I will do with this client that will enhance their ability to find their own solutions?" The worker will also want to identify the things the client has achieved in the past which can be used to reinforce that they have the ability to resolve their current situation.

The empowerment and enablement principles serve to remind those involved with families, that it is important that such work is seen by clients to add value to their lives by giving due weight to those things which are important for them at the time of seeking support.

To summarise, empowerment and enablement:

- \_\_\_affirm that someone (the worker in this case) has confidence in their ability to make the right decisions
- \_\_\_highlight the fact that the worker is clearly aware that the client has to live with decisions made and that the worker is there to support that process
- \_\_\_provide tangible reinforcement for the fact that the worker considers the client's own needs to be a significant and important part in any decisions that need to be made
- \_\_\_provide a framework for the client to work within and "to learn by doing" processes of problem solving and

effective decision making. (Munford et al., 1998:76).

## Key components of strengths-based family support work

Strengths-based service delivery is a new way of understanding both the relationship between workers and clients and of understanding the entire support process. Strengths-based work provides a way of looking at family work that has moved the focus of many services from a 'deficit' model of family functioning to one which seeks to identify the competencies and skills that families have and then to focus attention upon finding solutions to the challenges clients face. Scott and O'Neil, talk of this as involving a "fundamental change in how we think about what we do" (ibid:1996:x). Deficit focused work often leaves families unable to move on. The strengths-based models enable workers to harness the abilities that all families have to create a vision of their own futures and then to set about supporting them as they achieve this. It is based upon an absolute conviction that families have the capacity and the desire to create safe, healthy and nurturing environments for their children, and that they have a right to be supported appropriately to do this.

One of the key elements that clients will bring to the helping relationship is a concern to make things better for themselves and their children. This key client strength has often been overlooked because agencies have taken a deficit approach to assessment and intervention work. The focus of strengths-based work is in direct contrast to those policy

makers and agencies who tend to see families with complex needs or who are experiencing difficult situations as lacking the motivation or the ability to change. Our research clearly identified that clients were committed to ensuring that their children did not miss out on opportunities and that they were very focused on providing for the needs of their children:

In general terms, staff saw the women as being very capable parents and very committed to their children. One worker talked of the focus her client had on the well-being and needs of her children:

She takes being a parent very responsibly, and tries not to let other issues influence the responsibility to her children. That means the ex-partner, she really tries very hard to get on with him, because of the children.

Staff identified the extent to which clients would go in order to do the best for their children.

It is important that this is recognised because it is often assumed that clients seeking support from agencies are neglectful or not concerned about the way they parent their children (Munford, et al., 1998: 75).

In our research, clients identified that strengths-based work enabled them to develop the confidence to use their skills to find solutions in a wide range of situations. These sorts of changes meant that after they left the service they would be better able to find solutions to future problems. Strengths-based work has the capacity to expand the coping frameworks of clients. Focusing upon solving presentation problems alone does not necessarily leave clients in a position where they can find solutions to new problems in the future. Strengths-based work provides the opportunity for clients to become confident in their ability to address a wide range of future situations and to find solutions to a variety of future problems.

A support relationship that is built upon the recognition that client strengths and previous achievements can be harnessed to bring about new changes. These strategies assume that no matter how difficult a situation may appear, clients do have strategies for dealing with their issues and that these should be built upon and used to extend their confidence in the change process. Strengths-based work places priority upon assisting the client to re-frame or give new meaning to what they have been able to achieve (Lee, 1994).

Strengths-based work enables clients to:

\_\_\_acknowledge and develop a more positive focus on self. This also involves enabling the client to gain the feeling of control over their life

\_\_\_develop their skills to critically reflect on the realities of their situation in order to identify new ways of

responding

\_\_\_evaluate the resources and strategies available to enhance competence and achieve goals

The collaborative nature of this sort of work means that clients and families increase their learning and skill base throughout the intervention. Because strengths-based work is focused upon solution-finding rather than problem defining, clients and families learn general solution and resource-finding skills, which can be

applied in a wide range of situations in the future. Our research clearly identified that clients often experienced lack of control over their lives when they came to the agency for support. In experiencing these feelings, clients often came to believe that they could not make and sustain changes in their lives and that things 'would never be any different'. The process of support giving needed to continually reinforce that clients were capable, had strengths and could create solutions to the challenges they faced. By focusing on what a parent or family can do well, independence is encouraged and family members are enabled to take control in other areas of their lives. This collegial approach to support work provides a daily reminder to clients that they can re-gain control and create a better future for themselves and their children. Of course, there will always be practical constraints on the nature of that future. However, the impact of external forces on families should not be allowed to take from them their ability to exert what control they can have over what happens inside their own families. Supportive services that adopt strengths-based practices are able to help families to identify those factors they can control and to derive maximum benefit from doing this.

### Intervention processes

An important early consideration in any support process is the level at which to begin working. Of course, in one sense, the choices are as diverse as is the pool of clients with whom one could work and the key component of any decision is the particular mix of issues, needs and characteristics which each client or situation presents. However, there are some general issues that need to be taken into consideration when making this decision. Issues of safety or risk of harm to clients, family members and staff who will be providing support, constitute one important ingredient when planning to begin supportive work. These issues must be canvassed early and situations of potential risk or actual harm identified and appropriate steps taken. These steps may involve deciding that no further work can occur until the risk is dealt with, or it may involve a decision to maintain a watching brief over the situation. Safety issues for staff, clients and their families will always take priority over any other work and must be dealt with first. Having excluded the presence of

risks to safety and developed a set of preliminary goals practitioners can then focus upon choosing the focus or level for early contact with client/family.

### Assessment and intake

Processes used for taking clients into a service, identifying their needs, defining the ways in which support can be offered and planning and reviewing the progress of the intervention are all tasks that must be accomplished with efficiency and skill by support workers. A broad-based assessment process allows for an interpretation of the causes and types of problems experienced by clients. It also links theory to practice through the exploration of all possible connections between the client's life and the root causes of the difficulties with which they are confronted (Fook, 1993). For example, problems faced by clients may not be derived from difficulties within the household but may emerge from their wider circumstances, such as inadequate housing. Effective assessment processes will take such components into account.

Assessment processes must also take into account the particular life experiences of families. Consequently, intake procedures need to be flexible and responsive and to provide maximum opportunity for family involvement. Attention needs to be paid to the location, the pace and the timing of assessment procedures. Assessments that adopt such an approach recognise the fact that families do not experience their lives in small discrete compartments.

Accordingly, these processes should focus upon as many life domains of the family as possible. It will clearly not be possible to adopt such an inclusive focus if the assessment has to be completed quickly. Many different types of social services now incorporate flexible and responsive assessment procedures into their practice. For example, in Aotearoa/New Zealand Maori social workers use a range of assessment approaches that reflect and incorporate an holistic view of whanau life (extended family).

### Records

Recording key assessment information is one way of ordering and making sense of the relationships between clients, their contexts and the work that is done to support them. Recording also provides the worker with the opportunity to examine their knowledge base in order to determine its potential contribution to assisting the client to view their situation differently and thus to change it. Assessment provides an opportunity for the worker to focus on client needs and at the same time reflect upon the knowledge and skills they bring to the helping relationship. Such recording systems facilitate reflective

practice by ensuring that support workers are focusing upon identifying issues, defining options and setting the issues presented by clients within their wider social context.

Given the significance of keeping a record of the development of client work, documentation will inevitably be a feature of assessment processes. Documentation is also important because it is ideal that information be collected only once, if at all possible. Good documentation procedures also assist with the sequential building of a picture of the life of the family and the issues that cause its members concern. Scott and O'Neil (1996) talk of the importance of keeping records that are both responsive to and shared by the client/family. Their discussion highlights the empowering and therapeutic benefits that can flow from using shared records and the increased "teachable moments" (ibid: 87-91) that are possible when clients and families actively contribute to the process of the intervention and the recording of information associated with this. In certain agencies shared record keeping will not be possible because of the nature of the work. However, these limited situations aside, the general principle of openness and accessibility in record keeping is an important facet of the operation of most agencies. Open records are a fundamental part of empowerment practice. When records are open, families are able to increase their level of participation in both assessment and intervention processes. These sorts of processes help to create actively involved family members who understand that not only are their perspectives valued, but that the agency also recognises that they have much to contribute to the way that the intervention progresses. While record-keeping is an important and integral part of service delivery, it should reflect not determine the work process.

The purposes of documentation should also be clarified and made explicit. Typically an agency will employ a range of recording mechanisms but those related to the client should remain confidential unless otherwise agreed upon by the client. For example, if the agency is to use client records in processes such as strategic planning and research, information given to clients when they enter the service should make this explicit. Such procedures will also ensure

that the agency is complying with the requirements of the Privacy Act (Munford et. al., 1998).

Assessment as empowerment The Strengths-based Approach to Assessment

Assessment processes can enable a family to 'tell their story' and to know that they have been heard (Milner and O'Byrne, 1998). Assessment is often the first substantive contact between an agency and a client/family. Therefore assessment is about an agency identifying the ways in which it might be able to assist these people to achieve some changes. It also provides clients and families with the opportunity to learn about the agency and decide whether it is likely to be able to meet their needs. The individuals who undertake client/family assessment will also be giving key messages in the way in which they present and the things they say about how the agency operates (style) and what they

have to offer (resources). Agencies that adopt a strengths-based style will present as distinctive in two important ways. Firstly, they will talk about the resources they have to offer in terms of assisting the family to find solutions (Scott and O'Neil, 1996:86). Secondly, the assessment interview will spend time focusing upon identifying the things that the client/family does well and the resources within the family network that may be brought to bear in the process of finding solutions:

The sheer effort that most clients have applied to seeking solutions before approaching a service will have provided a wonderful training ground in decision-making and management. Many have spent more life-days than most workers in negotiating with government departments, living on insufficient incomes, escaping abuse, and improvising. (Scott and O'Neil, 1996:55).

And so, in these ways, the assessment process provides an opportunity for both the client/family and the agency to evaluate whether or not they can work together to create changes. Our research identified quite clearly that the greater the effort able to be expended in assessment, the greater the likelihood of success (Munford et.al., 1998). The ability of an agency to come to a clear understanding with a client about the way in which they can contribute to the achievement of desired changes is obviously a profoundly important dimension of successful client work.

Matching worker to client and family

The process of allocating a worker to a client has also been found (Munford et. al., 1998) to be a highly significant part of the assessment process. In our research we identified that supervisors employed a case allocation method that focused upon identifying key aspects relating to the primary client, and their context and then to identifying the front-line staff member who would best be able to meet the needs of this person. During assessment supervisors considered a range of factors such as how the worker would appear to be to the client, to areas of expertise or areas where a worker might have a 'blockage' on a particular issue. They identified particular skills or qualities in workers that would fit well with the needs of each particular client.

Supervisors could produce very clear and precise accounts of why they matched a particular client with a particular worker.

I am actually quite clear about why I chose this worker in this particular case. I wanted someone who had experience of young teenage boys. And most of our team have daughters. And they are younger than (son) is. And I particularly wanted someone who was able to interpret (son's) behaviour for (subject) as well as support her while she puts some limits in place for what was allowed in the home.

Supervisors also allowed their practice wisdom to guide them when matching a worker to a client. They had strong working relationships with their staff, knew them well and trusted their own judgements about what style of work would best meet a particular client's needs (Munford et. al., 1998:38).

Strong alliances between workers and clients create a synergy that means that the support provided is able to be used to maximum effect. The support relationship is the medium from within which meaningful changes will develop; the stronger this relationship, the greater the potential for change. While clients in our research were not aware of the effort and attention that went into selecting a worker to support them, many commented on the ease with which they were able to connect with the worker. They also talked of the support relationship as qualitatively different to any other support relationships they had experienced previously and some talked of feeling that their support worker was picked especially for them.

Many services operate intake and case allocation mechanisms that do not emphasise careful matching of worker with client. Some organisations simply allocate clients to workers on the basis of who is available to work with a particular client at the time of initial client inquiry. Other agencies operate rotating intake teams who receive and have allocated to them all incoming clients for that week. There is substantial pressure on agencies to achieve certain client intake levels and to complete client work with maximum speed. However, our research clearly suggests that the drive to make services extremely efficient (in terms of client movement) may in fact result in the loss of an important dimension of the support process; the relationship between client and worker. If agencies are able to devote attention to the process of matching worker and client, the resultant interventions are likely to be more effective.

Establishing rapport

A focus upon practical tasks is an important ingredient in building successful helping relationships. Services that can combine practical and supportive components are particularly successful at moving clients from a position of dependence to independence (Scott and O'Neil, 1996; Dore, 1993; Pharis and Levin., 1991). In short, strengths-based family support work:

is not the job for someone who is afraid of getting their hands dirty or who is unable to perform the multiplicity of roles required. Family preservation has rediscovered the power of integrating the clinical and the concrete (Scott and O'Neil, 1996:37).

Our research identified that focusing upon the concrete needs of clients and their families early on facilitated the development of very effective support relationships (Munford et. al., 1998:41-49). Clients, who are hungry, stressed because of financial pressures, in poor health, or living in overcrowded, damp or inadequate accommodation find it extraordinarily difficult to focus upon any other issues. Our work also identified that working to achieve changes in the physical environment provided a non-threatening forum in which the support relationship could be developed. The development of the relationship itself is a discrete piece of any intervention. It should be focused upon from the first contact with a client and it is absolutely crucial to the success of the intervention (Munford et. al., 1998). Working with clients to make things better in their daily environments provides a tangible way of demonstrating commitment to the support relationship by the worker and provides a number of concrete tasks upon which client and worker can focus while developing this relationship.

That's felt really difficult with this client. It feels as if the original worker went in and did a lot of the practical things, put family day care in place, some of those things, and I haven't had the practical things as a bridge to build the relationship.

The provision of practical help marked out this relationship as qualitatively different from other support relationships by clients. They interpreted it as indicating that the worker saw them as special and was willing to respond to them on a very human level (Munford et. al., 1998:67).

Practical tasks can form a bridge that can be used to build the support relationship. Working on practical tasks also provides a practitioner with rich opportunities to learn about the life of the client and family and

to come to a detailed understanding of the way in which a diverse range of factors work together to create change in the situations the client has identified. Deeper issues that impact upon the client and family will not usually come to the surface until this relationship feels safe for the client. At this point, new goals will often emerge and, as a consequence, the focus of work will often change.

#### Goal setting, and ongoing review

There are some key components in the processes used by agencies to plan, monitor and carry out supportive work with clients. The development of a structure to guide the support process is clearly crucial if the potential benefits of receiving formal support are to be fully harnessed. Agency support can only be effective if there is a clear understanding between worker and client about the purpose of that work (goals) and if the ways in which that purpose is to be achieved (tasks) is agreed upon. Support work has a meaning and a purpose that extends beyond simply 'being there' and listening to the issues and experiences of a client. Goal setting and review in its many forms is, therefore, an important feature of agency work with families.

The goal setting process provides an excellent opportunity to harness client energy and focus at the beginning of the intervention and it is also one way to put the client clearly in the driving seat. From an empowerment perspective, goal setting clearly reinforces to the client that their views and understanding of the situation are absolutely crucial to the work being undertaken. Goal setting can be used to "give a message of competence" to clients and this can help to move individuals from a focus on problems to a focus on solutions (Scott and O'Neil, 1996:78). The goals of support work are to contribute to enhancing client competence:

the important determinant in judging the success or otherwise of an intervention is not whether or not needs have been met, but whether they have been met in a way that makes the family more competent with respect to its ability to negotiate its course of development (Dunst et. al., 1988:x).

By developing goals collaboratively with clients and families, and by regularly engaging with them in a process of review and development of these goals, the chances that the work will leave clients and their families strengthened and more able to move on is increased. A shared goal setting process also serves to demystify the process of support and to reduce the level of client fear and anxiety that can accompany help-seeking (Scott and O'Neil, 1996:79). The strengths-based models emphasise the importance of framing realistic and achievable goals at the beginning of the intervention because these build confidence and a belief that change is possible.

A realistic goal might be to practise for change rather than achieving absolute change (Scott and O'Neil, 1996:82).

Those responsible for framing up goals with families need to maintain a clear focus on the difference between a family's goals, which might be quite broad and extend well beyond the support that is going to be offered, and the goals that will form the focus of support work. So, for instance, a family may have as one of their goals to clear all their debts, however, the nature of family circumstances may well mean that achieving this goal will take longer than the intervention. Thus, a more appropriate goal might be to develop a plan for becoming debt-free and a further goal might be to begin to successfully implement the initial stages of that plan. Each goal should also focus on one single aspect of the support. Thus, a client or family might have a large number of related goals. By keeping each goal discrete, the process of review and the ability of agency and client to identify meaningful change will be enhanced.

Our own research (Munford et al., 1998; Sanders et. al., 1999) indicates that the early weeks of an intervention can be seen as a goal setting period in which both the client and the agency begin to define some of the more important parameters of the intervention. This settling period is a vital part of the intervention because it will often set the pattern for the intervention as a whole. It is important, therefore, that it not be left to drift while waiting for goals to emerge. It can be difficult to get a client or family to focus on 'goal-setting' in a formal way at the beginning of the intervention. However, it should still be possible to frame up fairly loosely worded statements of the things the client or family would like to see as different. The temptation to let things settle down and come back and do this later should be avoided if at all possible because it is important that the motivation for change demonstrated by the client or family in seeking support is harnessed and focused upon right at the beginning.

While flexibility is important, it is equally important that the processes used by an agency do provide the mechanisms through which the work undertaken with the client can maintain a proper focus and not be left to drift. For this reason, the use of goal setting and action reviews as formalised times when client, worker and supervisor make key decisions about what is to happen and what has happened through the process of

support is important. Systematic practice enables the client to move from a state of confusion and despair to one where they know they can be assisted to address their issues. Thompson (1996) states:

Service users are often in a state of confusion by virtue of the particular problems they face. If we are not careful, we can add to this state of confusion by being vague and unfocussed. In situations characterised by confusion and a lack of direction the people workers role is often that of an 'anchor' providing a degree of stability, security and clarity. An unfocussed approach can therefore not only fail to fulfill this important role, but also add to the confusion and instability (Thompson, 1996:164-165).

Goal setting can also subtly reinforce the fact that the support provided by the agency is finite and focused on certain aspects of the client's life. This is important because support work is not a substitute for family life, neither can it be a permanent substitute for clients own personal support systems.

Clients, as well as staff, were well aware that the support was not open-ended. In this sense, goal-setting and review were seen as an important part of accountability of staff to both the service and to the clients with whom they worked. One staff member expressed the purpose of goal setting in precisely these terms:

I probably work in a broader sense than the goals, but I inevitably find that the goals have been met. And I like the process of a review visit every three months because I think that that keeps me accountable really that the goals are being achieved. Even though I haven't worked towards those in a very focused way and it also allows us to reassess what's come out in the interim three months and perhaps the goals that are set then are a bit more realistic. (Munford et. al., 1998:70)

Finally, these processes also serve to demonstrate to clients that the work can respond to their changing needs and also to identify where this work fits in their wider lives:

Goal-setting, then, occurred in a context which recognised the need for flexibility, the fact that issues could change and the importance of a client-driven process of support. Staff were able to provide examples of situations where time was spent performing supportive functions which did not directly address the goals set. However, this work was seen in the context of the need to be able to respond to the situation which presented itself to the worker on each visit. It also recognised the fact that support work provided in a client's own home must, of necessity, be able to respond to that situation. (Munford et al., 1998:69).

Goals can be phrased positively because they identify a desirable future state that the client wishes to achieve. In this way they focus outwardly and on the future. The process of supportive work will ideally demonstrate to clients the way in which goals can be converted into manageable steps and achieved in stages.

Goal setting and review:

- \_\_\_ensures that the client obtains a sense of achievement and an ability to successfully confront issues,
- \_\_\_enables opportunities for learning to be harnessed and goals to be clearly articulated,
- \_\_\_enables frameworks for identifying and for assessing effectiveness to be identified,
- \_\_\_ensures realistic priorities are set and maintained,
- \_\_\_ensures that change is named and acknowledged by worker and client,
- \_\_\_enables role clarity because it provides a formal opportunity to focus upon the definition of the boundaries of supportive work.

(derived from Scott and O'Neil, 1996 and Thompson, 1996).

Ending work with clients

The way in which support work is finished is as important as the way in which the intervention itself is undertaken.

The process of closure can be used to reinforce the changes that the client and family have made during the intervention and, in this way, closure continues the process of client/family empowerment.

The approach to closure should be nested within an overall support process in which the family is seen as an active participant. Early, active and continuous involvement by the family means that closure is not likely to come as a surprise, particularly when this is done within a context of participatory evaluation. If the client has been actively involved in the planning and the implementation of the support provided by the agency, and if they have been encouraged to view closure as a positive reinforcement of their skills and abilities, they will see this as an opportunity rather than a threat.

In our research, we observed that staff would use the process of finishing to reinforce client achievements by structuring the final visits in a very positive way:

The strengths-based nature of the work whereby workers identified and affirmed those things that the client was doing well, as well as the achievement of successes throughout the intervention, formed the cornerstone of this work. This client also talked of the impact of the strengths-based approach on her experience of closure:

Yeah. It seems funny, but, by them leaving, it has given me the boost that, hey somebody thinks I can do it. I can do it. So it is a bit of reinforcement (Munford et al., 1998:82).

Because the interventions had focused upon developing client confidence in solution-finding and had left decision making very clearly in client hands, finishing was often a natural part of the process and did not constitute a major barrier for clients to surmount. The Barnardos Family Support Programme, at the time we conducted our research, was also able to exercise some flexibility in terms of setting the completion time for each intervention, and this flexibility meant that it was possible to tailor completion to client rather than funder needs. Changes to the system for purchasing services that define the length of interventions means that this more responsive method of working with clients may no longer always be possible.

Funding constraints have a significant impact upon the way in which agencies are able to undertake their work. Because of this, many providers find themselves in the position of not being able to complete interventions in a manner that enables them to maximise the benefits from the intervention for clients and families. We would emphasise here that it is extremely desirable that funding policies be sufficiently flexible so that they can enable organisations to provide support for clients and families in an effective manner. Being forced into a position of having to close before a client is ready can, in fact, jeopardise the benefits of the work done and can result in wastage of resources rather than efficiencies.

Closure, especially if the work undertaken has been intensive or focused around very stressful issues, should not leave the client feeling abandoned. The manner in which closure is effected by an organisation can liberate clients and enable them to move positively towards the future or it can leave the feeling marginalised. Reflective and empowering practice ensures that the client has developed problem solving skills and systems for survival. Their ability to move on and carry on without the assistance of a helping agency may be determined by the contexts within which clients find themselves. Thus, work which is able to focus on these wider contextual issues will be likely to have enhanced clients' abilities to continue to grow and function well in the future.

#### **Building the supportive relationship**

The key to achieving a partnership with clients is the relationship a worker is able to establish with this person. The establishment of this relationship is the responsibility of the worker and is fact an important task in and of itself.

Without this relationship nothing else can happen. There are some key components: trust, honesty, respect and the demonstration of genuine liking for the person. It takes time and effort to create this sort of relationship. Our research findings clearly suggest that workers must quite consciously set about building trusting and supportive relationships and time must be made available to them to enable them to do this:

The relationship between the worker and the client formed the cornerstone of the supportive process. The focus on the development of the relationship as a distinct piece of support work itself was an important feature of the service and reflected the contextual way in which it operated. Part of the effectiveness of the interventions was attributable to the synergy that was created between worker and client (Munford et al., 1998:66).

The significance of the support relationship cannot be over-stated. In our research, and in that conducted by countless other researchers, the role that this relationship plays in the creation of change is repeatedly highlighted. An important reason why a strong relationship must be established between worker and client is that it provides a safe place within which clients can be open and honest. Safety, openness, trust and honesty are four important preconditions for change and growth. Indeed, many authors have identified the importance of focusing upon the development of the relationship as a separate and distinct piece of work to be undertaken in client work. Dore (1993), for instance, highlights the need

for clients to know that they are valued as individuals. Scott and O'Neil (1996) identify the need for clients to know that they are seen as experts in their own right and that their role in the intervention is absolutely pivotal to its success.

Clients we interviewed talked of feeling genuinely liked by the worker they were matched with. Workers and supervisors identified that, for many clients, the support relationship would be the first time they experienced being liked for who they were and seen as competent and capable. Many clients coming to agencies for supportive work have had previous contact with child protection and other investigative services. As a result of this contact, their expectation of agency intervention is that they will feel a complete lack of control over what happens to themselves and their children. Supportive services will often, therefore, need to spend much of their early contact changing these expectations and creating a place of safety and a sense that the family will be listened to, respected and treated with dignity.

Modelling positive ways of managing relationships provides important opportunities for clients to learn new ways of interacting. What this means is that, in addition to gaining knowledge and understanding from the support relationship, clients are also able to experience a well-functioning relationship themselves. For many this will be the first time in their adult lives they have had this experience. The support workers we interviewed talked of the importance of modelling positive and assertive ways of relating to children and partners. Clients talked of applying their observations of workers within their lives- learning from the experience of a support relationship and then applying this experience in other areas of daily living proved to be a powerful change agent. There are many strategies for developing a relationship with clients some of these are considered below in the section that discusses multi-levelled interventions.

Responding to emotional needs of clients and readiness to create change

The emotional impact of experiences such as abuse, grief and loss, bearing and being responsible for children, being poor, isolated or abandoned is frequently a factor which lies behind a client's need for support from an external agency. Many workers identify the emotional consequences of these sorts of experiences as being crippling and of locking clients into cycles of depression and despair. Support work must at some level address the emotional needs of clients. This is often done through the mechanism of interpersonal support. Here we are referring to the specific processes of giving support to clients to assist them in addressing these emotional needs.

While learning concrete parenting skills may help parents to develop some aspects of parenting, it does not develop their capacity to nurture (Dore, 1993; Munford et. al., 1998). The ability to accept nurture and support may need to be developed in individuals coming to agencies for support because they have learned to believe that they have little worth. Workers, for their part, must be able to recognise this in clients and to work initially on building the capacity of clients to accept care and support as a first step on the way to addressing other issues. The inability to accept care from others may often be mistaken for indifference on the part of a client. This being so, it is doubly important for workers to be willing to expend considerable time and effort to bridge the gap and stay with a client until they are willing and able to see themselves as worthy of support. Unravelling the effect of years of emotional neglect will not happen quickly, but if significant changes in the ability of parents to accept care and to nurture their children are to be achieved, long-term support may well be required in a number of cases. In our research, we identified the role that these sorts of factors played in the process of support-giving:

One of the supervisors identified this aspect of the experience of the Family Support Service:

The ones that go through the whole process, I think for them probably it has been very positive because it has been somebody in their lives who has really given them positive regard and all those things and that may be really the first time that has happened for any length of time in their lives. They have been constantly put down or made to feel that they are useless. I think even if you achieve that, that's wonderful.

Breaking the cycle of abuse and neglect and working to build a better family/whanau life for one's own children can be a long and lonely struggle. Staff commented that working through the issues raised by these childhood experiences was an important feature of support work. A worker commented:

There is issues over not wanting to parent how her mother parented and she is very aware of that. That she doesn't want to parent the way her mother did. There is a big gap for my client where her father committed suicide and she cannot remember a lot of her childhood.

Staff noted the vital importance of mothers receiving adequate nurturing themselves if they were to successfully nurture their own children (Munford et. al., 1998:62).

It is important to note that support workers must be able to recognise these situations for clients and to work through them rather than to interpret them as evidence of a lack of competence or caring or

motivation. In many instances a relationship with a worker needs to be formed and sustained over time before a client will achieve all their desired goals. For example, some changes to parenting styles will not take place until the client feels able to parent and supported to do so. Confidence in this can emerge out of the helping relationship.

#### Active, reflective listening and the development of communication skills

Communication, in the form of conversations, is the primary way in which support work is carried out and the way in which conversations are structured and the language which is used is clearly a vital ingredient in successful support work. We have noted elsewhere the impact that active listening has upon the development of client confidence and increased ability to effectively manage a variety of challenging situations:

Active listening, then, provided a really significant opportunity to develop decision-making and problem-solving skills by clients and to develop confidence in their own decision-making. A client talked of the way she experienced active listening:

I find when I say things I am not listening to myself, and what (worker) does, is she says things back to you. So you can hear it. And I think that is what it is. She gives you ideas, she doesn't tell you what you should do. She gives you ideas, or she will say, so what you are saying is. So you hear it, and you can say, yeah, I did say that. And it sort of gets you trained a little bit to listen to what you are saying. (Munford et al., 1998:72).

Many clients seeking support from agencies bring a past in which they have been devalued and not listened to. The opportunities for them, as adults, to develop strong communication skills and to use these in their fullest sense to express themselves and influence the things that happen to them have been limited. Support work will often need to focus upon building up confidence in clients. This will involve encouraging them to understand that their perspectives and experiences are not only important but that they are a vital ingredient in the processes of change that can occur through the support experience. Undertaking a client-focused assessment begins the process of opening up opportunities for clients to develop confidence in communicating. This process will continue throughout the intervention because of its focus upon supporting clients to find their own solutions and valuing their perspectives and interpretations of events and situations.

Workers need to carefully match their language to the client's situation and their social and cultural milieu. Care will be taken to use language that suggests that worker and client are partners in the process of change and that each brings some important resources to the relationship. It is important that workers reinforce the fact that both parties are expert and that the client is the more powerful in this relationship. At the end of the day, it is the client and family who must continue to live with the situation, and so key decisions must be left in their hands.

In supporting the development of new communication skills workers have important resources to share with client and family. Many of these relate to the modelling of ways of giving positive, assertive and clear messages. Workers will demonstrate these skills in a wide variety of situations throughout the intervention and the power of this modelling as a force for change and client growth should never be underestimated. Enhancing feelings of control and confidence

Building an enhanced sense of control is an important dimension of support work.

Research data suggested that several strategies were particularly important in the development of increased levels of client confidence. The strengths-based nature of the work, whereby workers identified and affirmed those things that the client was doing well, as well as the achievement of successes throughout the intervention, formed the cornerstone of this work (Munford, 1998:82).

Clients will often seek support from formal agencies precisely because they feel powerless to create change in their lives. Individuals who believe that they have some control over stressful life events seem to make better adjustments than those who do not feel they have such control. The process of seeking help is itself indicative of client strength and commitment to important dimensions of family life. However, at the point of seeking help, clients may be unable to see this as a strength and may have become so problem-saturated that they are temporarily unable to see the possibilities for change. This can be emotionally and physically debilitating.

Support work can take this expression of strength (help-seeking) and use it in the process of building client confidence and a sense of control. Other skills and strategies discussed throughout this chapter identify the many ways in which workers can support clients as they build confidence and begin to take back control over key areas of their lives.

### Context sensitive work and multi-levelled interventions

Working from a strength base means that agencies focus upon designing interventions which fit clients, not fitting clients to the intervention. If we are to build realistic understandings of families we must look at factors within and outside of the family which influence family life. For example, poverty will influence the ability of families to be fully participating members of society. Similarly, labour market changes and changes in unemployment rates and patterns of employment will influence the ability of families to participate and to function well. The fact that families may be providing intergenerational care for a number of members will also impact upon the way that they are able to function and the way in which change will be achieved. Gledhill (1994) highlights the importance of finding ways around the

constraints that structural barriers such as these impose on families. Families are entitled to receive support to meet the needs of their members. Families that are experiencing difficulties because of structural factors such as unemployment and who live in impoverished communities may have difficulty accessing informal support mechanisms and so may require access to formal services.

The informal networks of individuals have a profound impact upon their ability to find positive and effective solutions to the challenges they confront. Individuals who have limited or non-existent informal networks and who are also attempting to grapple with the challenges of parenthood may well require the support of formal agencies if they are to provide a nurturing environment for their children. In these situations, formal agencies are often able to provide the experience of nurturing that is missing from the client's life and which is important for them to experience if they are to thrive at the parenting role. We refer to the existence of informal and personal support networks as naturally occurring networks. Families who seek assistance from family support agencies are often living in impoverished circumstances. Resources in their communities may have diminished. For example, shopping centres, community centres, libraries and so on may have closed and as a consequence, the natural places for congregating may be reduced. These families are also often living away from extended family networks that are able to be supportive. Moreover, the simple fact that extended family members may live in close by does not mean that they will inevitably be in a position to assist. They themselves may, in fact, require assistance because they are similarly stretched. Hence it may be difficult for the client to establish naturally occurring networks that they can call upon. This is why home-based services can be extremely helpful for families.

Key components of multi-levelled interventions:

- \_\_ the flexibility to utilise a wide range of techniques and strategies in client support
- \_\_ the ability to respond to a wide range of issues and to address these in the order and style which is most appropriate for the client concerned
- \_\_ the recognition that clients may need to be linked in with other providers and resources and supporting the client while such connections become established,
- \_\_ the use of different modalities to deliver services such as group and individual support

(Munford et. al., 1998:41-42).

Successful interventions are often those that are able to work at a number of levels. We have found that the learning of new parenting strategies for instance requires reinforcement in a number of contexts. A one-off parenting course will not always address long-term issues and in fact can make the client feel incompetent. In many cases they can reinforce feelings of hopelessness because they do not address the context in which the issues are embedded. They often do not allow for practising change. Multi-levelled interventions combine a range of inputs that can be tailored to the needs of the individual client. Sometimes needs are purely informational, others can be contextual, while some are emotional, behavioural and social. An effective intervention is one that can address all of these and does not require a client to compartmentalise their life and seek support for a range of issues from many different places. The worker is key in ensuring that seeking help does not become an additional burden.

#### Home-based interventions

The family support services we have researched work with clients in their own homes and in and around the daily demands of their lives. These services were originally part of the Homebuilder's programmes imported from the United States during the mid 1980s. Home visiting as a strategy which enables effective client support is a feature of many family supportive services internationally. We take a wide approach to the definition of the term home visiting. In it we include things such as:

- \_\_ visits to the client's home

- \_\_\_attendance by the worker at meetings with other professionals with the client such as government agencies, schools, health providers, court appearances, lawyer visits
- \_\_\_taking the client to other welfare providers such as food banks and so forth
- \_\_\_assisting clients to shop for groceries and other household items, trips to parks and other recreational facilities and the full range of other activities that comprise the daily lives of families.

Home visiting places the worker in the daily life of the client and family and in so doing provides opportunities for the worker to become very familiar with the way that life is for these people and the constraints and resources that are available to them. They provide many more opportunities for “teachable moments” (Scott and O’Neil, 1996) than is the case for office or clinic based support. The willingness to visit and work in and around the home context is often interpreted by clients as providing evidence of tangible commitment by workers and agencies to work with them through all the issues they are facing. This type of support also recognises that attending clinic or office appointments can create major barriers for many clients because of lack of resources that can be allocated to things such as transport

costs. Finally, it also recognises that attending clinics or offices for appointments can be very intimidating for many clients and that this can create barriers to the accomplishment of changes by clients.

#### Providing practical support

Research internationally has highlighted the significance of practical support in client work. For instance, Pharis and Levin (1991) identified that assistance with obtaining concrete resources was an important ingredient in successful outcomes for maltreating parents. This support needs to be provided as an integral part of service delivery. Being able to respond on a practical as well as an emotional and advocacy level to clients will greatly enhance the effectiveness of social services.

In our ongoing research we found that practical support played a very important role, particularly in the early stages of the relationship:

Analysis suggested that practical help served an important function in building the relationship.

This was particularly so in the early weeks of the relationship when it featured prominently in the work done with clients. One worker, who took over support of a client after the resignation of another staff member, identified this function of practical help:

That’s felt really difficult with this client. It feels as if the original worker went in and did a lot of the practical things, put family day-care in place, some of those things, and I haven’t had the practical things as a bridge to build the relationship.

The provision of practical help marked out this relationship as qualitatively different from other support relationships experienced by clients. They interpreted it as indicating that the worker saw them as special and was willing to respond to them on a very human level. In so doing, it assisted with the development of openness between the client and worker and provided the client with a feeling of being seen as a total person (Munford et. al., 1998:67).

Scott and O’Neil (1996) also identified that practical support provided an opportunity to demonstrate trust and that this was an important part of establishing the relationship (1996:6). To be effective, supportive services need to be able to respond on a human level to clients as individuals and members of families that are part of complex and interlocking sets of circumstances. These circumstances together contain both the issues and the solutions to the challenges faced by clients. Services that are unable to respond to the wide range of issues that clients confront are unlikely to be able to support clients and their families to create long term, sustainable change.

#### Knowledge in action

One of the issues that recurred in our discussions with workers was the way in which they used practice wisdom, experience and instinct to guide them in choosing the right time and right way to address particular issues. The staff who participated in our research often used phrases such as “let her take the lead”, “go at her pace” or “go with what is on top for today”. They identified that in doing this they were providing opportunities for clients to control the course of the intervention and to make key decisions in both the support relationship and in their lives. However, in maximising client control, workers did not abandon any effort to guide and influence the course that work took. The critical factor here was the ability of workers to quickly, during the course of a conversation, identify the right moment to focus on important issues:

And initially I always take their lead. I never ask them extremely personal questions initially.

Obviously I do once they feel safe with me. But I just take it quietly and take her lead. If she wants

to talk about something that's fine, but I would wait for her to give me a lead, certainly be very quick to pick up on it  
(Munford et. al., 1998:76).

Being able to quickly see the "teachable moment" (Scott and O'Neil, 1996:87) and capitalise on it with a client is a skill, which develops over time. Often in supervision a new worker will identify a teachable moment that was not maximised and learn new skills for seizing these in future interactions with clients. The strengths-based approach to support work has a parallel in the disability support area, where there has been an emphasis for many years upon the importance of working from a strengths base. The shift from problem to solution-focused work is not a mere semantic change. It requires a fundamental shift in the way in which support work is undertaken and in the way in which workers develop supportive relationships with clients. This involves changes in attitudes and beliefs so that families and clients are perceived positively and are seen as competent and able to find their own solutions. It also involves the development of specific sorts of help-giving behaviours "such as active, reflective listening skills" (Jones et al., 1996:94). This includes developing a repertoire of skills around problem solving. Specific strategies include supporting clients to break issues down into manageable steps, identifying issues or problems about which clients can and cannot control and beginning work by focusing upon easily achievable goals and then moving on

to more challenging situations once confidence has been built. This also includes being able to accept help when needed and moving to a position where one can, in turn, support others. The development of new knowledge and the building of a repertoire of skills must be regularly affirmed by the worker and this forms an integral part of the change process.

#### Making connections outside the service

Strengths-based work begins from the premise that clients and families have the means to resolve the issues they face and that no single or group of resources that an agency can provide will ever contain the solution. Support that is offered to a client/family will always have limitations, some of these may be insurmountable, however others will be able to be provided more effectively by another provider. Support to gain access to services from other agencies will be provided in such situations by services operating from a strengths base. Such support demonstrates clearly to clients that there is never any single answer or source of support, and again places clients in direct control of solution finding. It does this because the process of referring on will involve them as partners in identifying the most appropriate place for them to go to seek this new resource. This work clearly leaves the client in the position of having control of the plan for support and places them at the centre of the overall support process. Services such as case management can pose a threat to client control because it can be interpreted as suggesting that persons other than the client and their family have greater knowledge and control over decisions about accessing key resources. Effective support strategies will always clearly identify that families and clients have the answers, and frequently within their networks they will have the resources to achieve many of their goals. What support workers can offer is assistance to work through the issues raised and in those cases where they do not have the resources, to assist with the identification and accessing of external resources.

#### Group experiences and individual work

In the same way that clients have differing configurations of need, so support workers will need to respond in differing ways as they work with clients to assist them in the process of change. Providing support through different structures is one very obvious way in which assistance can be tailored to the needs of individual clients. For instance, in some situations two or more support workers can combine skills and resources and offer a group programme that could provide either therapeutic or knowledge-based experiences for a number of clients. Over the past 5-10 years there has been a significant growth in the number and range of group programmes that are offered to individuals who wish to address issues around being a parent. Many of these are knowledge-based and provide parenting educational courses and self-confidence, assertiveness and self-esteem programmes. Our research indicated that in certain situations these group experiences provided a valuable way of increasing skill and knowledge levels of parents. They also provided opportunities to gain confidence and support from learning that many other parents experienced similar challenges to themselves. This sort of contextualising experience is particularly important for clients who are socially isolated.

Our research also indicated that group experiences did not produce consistent improvements in parenting where the clients had unmet personal or emotional needs (Munford et. al., 1997). Several of the clients in our research had participated in a number of parenting programmes, and most had quite comprehensive

knowledge of parenting strategies. In other words, the issues they were experiencing in relation to being a parent were not to do with a lack of knowledge. In this context, we talked of the twin concepts of being “unavailable to parent” and “readiness to parent”. Here, it is important to note, that the value that can be gained from group educational programmes will be directly related to the context in which the need is embedded, rather than the simple fact of the need itself. Where the need is for information and practice in developing new skills, group educational programmes have much to offer. Where the need is for support to deal with the emotional consequences of being a parent, or of past experience, group educational programmes are unlikely to have a significant impact unless they are coupled with individual work. In these situations family support interventions have a key role in assisting the incorporation of skills learned on parenting courses into the daily lives of clients.

### To conclude:

Families seeking agency support have often been characterised as dysfunctional or as unable or unwilling to make the necessary changes in their lives. The process of seeking help itself requires personal strength because it involves individuals recognising that there is a need for change.

It is essential to view clients positively and as partners in the change process. This means:

- \_\_\_beginning from a position of respect for clients as people and acknowledging their expertise
  - \_\_\_acknowledging why they may be unavailable to parent and not blaming parents for this
  - \_\_\_identifying their competencies
  - \_\_\_identifying what gets in the way of the change process
  - \_\_\_recognising and believing that most parents are committed to doing well for their children
- 
- \_\_\_supporting clients to find their own way through the issues they face and believing that they have the capacity to do this
  - \_\_\_understanding the resource factors that impede positive parenting
  - \_\_\_sharing positive and concrete strategies for parenting
  - \_\_\_supporting parents to be effective advocates for their children

It should always be remembered that clients have the same rights as any one else and one of these rights is to be treated with respect and dignity. Their need for help does not mean they should be treated as lacking in competence or as giving up their right to be treated with dignity. The role of supporter does not elevate our position and give us the right to treat clients as lesser beings. In order to facilitate change we must be able to have the confidence of the clients we work with. They make the change, we don't. If they are not part of deciding on the tasks to be achieved and the goals to be met it is unlikely that they will achieve and sustain positive change. People who are treated as incompetent and unworthy are unlikely to be ever in a position to believe that they could ever make change. The way we approach clients, the messages we communicate to them in our attitude, body language, as well as in the words we use, all need to be congruent with our beliefs about family strengths and family change.

The achievement of client and family change is a creative and adaptive process. At its best, it weaves together the personal strengths which clients bring with a tailored process of personal support. Our research has clearly demonstrated that, despite the challenges clients may face, family strengths can be harnessed to bring about change.

Agency support is added to client strengths, it does not replace them. In this way clients are enabled to grow and change, and at the end of an intervention they are able to move on by themselves.

For further information please contact Jackie Sanders [j.sanders@massey.ac.nz](mailto:j.sanders@massey.ac.nz) or Robyn Munford: [R.Munford@massey.ac.nz](mailto:R.Munford@massey.ac.nz) or see publications produced by the Barnardos Child and Family Research Centre and the book Supporting Families published by Dunmore Press and available from public and university libraries and bookstores or from the Dunmore Press Website.

### References:

- Dore, M. (1993). Family Preservation and Poor Families: When “Homebuilding” is not enough. *Families in Society*, November:545-556.
- Dunst, C., Trivette, C. & Deal, A. (1988). *Enabling and Empowering Families*. Cambridge MA, Brookline Books.
- Fook, J. (1993). *Radical Casework: A theory of practice*. St Leonards, Allen and Unwin.

- Gledhill, M. (1994). Community Support Services for Families: From Prevention to Promotion of Family Strengths. J. Inglis and L. Rogan (eds) *Flexible Families: New Directions in Australian Communities*. Australia. Pluto Press.
- Jones, T., Garlow, J., Rutherford, T. & Barber, P. (1996). Family Empowerment in a Family Support Program. In Singer, G., Powers, L. & Olson, A. (eds). *Redefining Family Support – Innovations in public-private partnerships*. Maryland, Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Lee, J.A. (1994). *The Empowerment Approach to Social Work Practice*. Columbia University Press, New York.
- Milner, J. & P. O'Byrne (1998). *Assessment in Social Work*. Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Munford, R. Sanders, J. Tisdall, M. Henare, A. & Spoonley, P. (1997). Families in Context: Parental Discipline Strategies with Children. *Childrenz Issues* 1(2): 25-28..
- Munford, R. Sanders, J. Tisdall, M. Henare, A. Livingston, K. & Spoonley, P. (1998). *Working Successfully with Families: Stage 2*. Wellington. Barnardos NZ.
- Pharis, M. & Levin, V. (1991). "A Person to Talk to Who Really Cared": High Risk Mothers' Evaluations of Services in an Intensive Intervention Research Program. *Child Welfare*, 70:307-320.
- Rogers, C. (1951). *Client-Centred Therapy: Its current practice, implications and theory*. London. Constable.
- Sanders, J., Munford, R. & Richards-Ward, L. (1999). *Working Successfully with Families: Stage 3*. Barnardos N.Z. Palmerston North, Massey University Press.
- Scott, D. & O'Neil, D. (1996). *Beyond Child Rescue: Developing Family-Centred Practice at St Luke's*. Sydney. Allen and Unwin.
- Thompson, D. (1998). *A World Without Welfare: New Zealand's colonial experiment*. Auckland University Press, Auckland.