

Interagency collaboration: Making it work

Lessons from the literature

March 2010

Introduction

This Research to Practice Note aims to improve understanding of effective interagency collaboration in a shared approach to child protection context and provides a brief overview of the pertinent literature in this area.

Definition

A useful definition is provided by Mattessich & Monsey (as cited in Townsend & Shelly, 2008, p.102):

“Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well defined relationship entered into by two or more organisations to achieve common goals. This relationship includes a commitment to mutual relationships and goals, a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards”.

Research context

The literature in the area of child protection and child welfare considers interagency collaboration from the perspectives of inter-departmental work, work a department or statutory body may undertake with other non government partners, and the work between non government partners. The benefits of interagency cooperation are well documented (Darlington & Feeney, 2008; Friedman, Reynolds, Quan, Call, Crusto & Kaufman, 2007; Green, Rockhill & Burrus, 2008; Metcalfe, Riedlinger, McKenzie & Cook, 2007) and some of these include:

- faster access to services
- reduced anxiety for workers
- increased quality of case monitoring and relapse support
- ensuring agency demands on a family are not competing or overwhelming
- consistency of message from all involved
- better decision making
- improved ability to provide needed and timely resources
- more effective use of limited resources
- development of new policy and practice
- reduction in duplication of service

Of great importance

“Collaboration can also improve the overall effectiveness of services, for example, by moving parents toward a greater state of “readiness to change” through provision of ample emotional, psychological, and tangible support.” (Green et al. 2008, p.58).

The majority of studies have tended to look at practice issues with a view to determining facilitators of and/or barriers to effective interagency work.

What facilitates effective interagency collaboration?

One of the most consistent findings in the literature is that of the importance of communication particularly in the context of relationship building (Darlington & Feeney, 2008; Darlington, Feeney &

Rixon, 2005a; Drabble, 2007; Dunlop & Holosko, 2004; Earles, Doyle, Lee, Malthouse & Selke, 2005; Ervin, 2004; Feiock, Steinacker & Park, 2009; Garret, 2004; Green et al. 2008; Head, 2008; Horwath & Morrison, 2007; Katz & Hetherington, 2006; Metcalfe et al. 2007; Spath, Werrbach & Pine, 2008) and is largely explored in the context of the relationships below.

Client and worker

It has been shown that client and worker relationships are enhanced when all stakeholders working with a family are communicating effectively with one another providing a seamless service to the family without the family having the responsibility to keep workers up to date, fill in gaps or repeat their stories (Friedman et al. 2007; Spath et al. 2008). Making clients aware of the differences in the roles of the staff working with them helps provide a meaningful rationale for decisions made (Darlington, Feeney & Rixon, 2005a). Maintaining an up to date knowledge on agency services is also important for staff in larger organisations to ensure responsiveness to both client need and questions (Ervin, 2004).

Worker and worker

The relationship workers from different agencies have with one another can be enhanced; when communication includes perceptions of who has the 'lead' (Garrett, 2004), particularly when joint initiatives or projects are being implemented (Flemons, Liscio, Gordon, Hibel, Gutierrez-Hersh & Rebholz, 2010); when explicit discussion of current practices, ideological /philosophical differences, and agency role to determine common ground occurs (Drabble, 2007; Garret, 2004; Head, 2008). The theme of 'common ground' or agreed shared understandings emerges through much of the literature as the platform from which to consolidate working relationships (Feiock et al. 2009; Horwath & Morrison, 2007; Krsevan, Dwyer & Young, 2004; Metcalfe et al. 2007; Spath et al. 2008; Willumsen, 2008; Witt & Wilburn, 2007). In so doing, the importance of communication in practice is more than just efficient information sharing about the client or family. It should include discussion about differences in practice and approaches such that these can be viewed as opportunities to develop shared understandings, for example, services can look how the community needs them to look (Fasoli & Moss, 2007), to inform changes to policy, guidelines and the like (Head, 2008) or to be more flexible in joint working arrangements in line with client need (Witt & Wilburn, 2007). In addition, it is important for agencies to know about the role of other services, and other service availability alleviating the need for clients to seek information from multiple services (Friedman et al. 2007; Horwath & Morrison, 2007; Krsevan et al. 2004).

Agency and Agency

The adoption of clear rules, decision making processes and realistic expectations of agency workers is crucial in sustaining an effective interagency collaboration (Darlington, Feeney & Rixon, 2005b; Head, 2008). In addition the importance of sharing ideas (Earles et al., 2005), reviewing joint goals, plans or approaches is highlighted in conjunction with the agency taking responsibility to ensure staff changes or turnover, policy reform or budgetary constraints are dealt with in a way that does not threaten the collaborative nature of the work being undertaken (Han, Carnochan & Austin, 2007; Head, 2008; Spath et al. 2008). In relation to an examination of the impact of staff turnover on children and youth in foster care, Strolin-Glotzman, Kollar & Trinkle, (2010) recommended a proactive approach involving garnishing the views of the clients and "collaborating *with* them on the development of interventions and innovations" that aim to address the issue (Strolin-Glotzman et al. 2010, p.52)

An agency needs to take responsibility for implementing effective case reviews to both support staff (Darlington & Feeney, 2008; Spath et al. 2008) and to identify cases that have been open longer than others to ascertain whether additional or other kinds of intervention are warranted, as this can impact directly on workers perceptions of interagency effectiveness and case difficulty (Cross, Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2005; Han et al. 2007).

Making it happen

The practice issues arising from the discussion so far in relation to making communication work, can be considered from the perspective of influence. Who can or should take responsibility for what is best seen in this context (Cunningham-Smith, 2004; Darlington & Feeney, 2008; Ervin, 2004; Krsevan et al. 2004; Willumsen, 2008). In summary:

The Individual can

- learn the roles and responsibilities of the agency/agencies being worked with,
- make information about agency roles and responsibilities available to the partners and families being worked with,
- make the time to promote communication by attending meetings, and
- undertake self reflection and challenge own beliefs (Darlington & Feeney, 2008; Darlington, Feeney & Rixon, 2005a; Ervin, 2004).

With reference to the last point Willumsen, (2008, p.362) argues that reflection can also be used at the agency level to “provide an analytical framework in order to facilitate understanding of interprofessional collaboration and the relationship between the interpersonal and interorganisational level in terms of degree of integration”. Outlined in the paper is a reflection model which “may serve to address different levels of collaboration, identify structures and relationships as well as the implications for the collaborative process in terms of opportunities and limitations.” (Willumsen, 2008, p.362).

The Agency also can

- Enable staff to be able to achieve what is within their sphere of influence by supporting attendance at meetings and participation in initiatives that promote shared understandings and best practice (Harlow & Shardlow, 2006; Metcalfe et al. 2007). This may include ensuring or developing effective liaison structures or guidelines, ensuring regularity of staff attendance at interagency meetings, increasing staff knowledge of other agencies and their roles, incorporating meeting time into workload management systems, implementing appropriate supervision and case review structures (Cross et al. 2005; Darlington & Feeney, 2008; Harlow & Shardlow, 2006; Harr, Souza & Fairchild, 2008; Head, 2008; Katz & Hetherington, 2006; Spath et al. 2008; Willumsen, 2008).
- Recognise the importance of joint training (Darlington & Feeney, 2008; Darlington, Feeney & Rixon, 2005a; Harr et al. 2008; Katz & Hetherington, 2006; Metcalfe et al. 2007).
- Increase the profile of the service by having a primary contact person or ‘point person’ at the agency, actively seeking contact with any agency that seems less engaged and promoting evaluation of the service offered (Jones, Crook & Webb, 2007).
- Implement appropriate computer technology and internet usage to facilitate, resource sharing, resource and agency knowledge, interagency communication and referral (Katz & Hetherington, 2006; Laming, 2009). An example of a government run service that facilitates these is the Human Services Network, (www.hsnet.nsw.gov.au) a free, secure website for government and non government staff working in the NSW human services sector. It provides a central location for sharing information across government and non-government agencies.
- Ensure actual facilitation of opportunities to “unpack and discuss entrenched differences” between agencies (Head, 2008, p.744) or other formal or informal opportunities to share at a broader level (Darlington & Feeney, 2008; Metcalfe et al. 2007).

Government

The government has been identified as important in achieving effective interagency collaboration with a number of issues noted.

Funding, or good resourcing, emerges as a central issue (Katz & Hetherington, 2006). Adequate clerical support has been found to be an important resource to support agency work (Spath et al. 2008). Further, financial and/or resource allocation should consider costs associated with promoting effective collaboration such as use of venues to allow for a range of opportunities for partners to come together (Krsevan et al. 2004). It has also been argued that what is funded, in terms of expected service delivery, must be congruent with identified needs of client group such that complex family needs receive a “range of resources and skilled professionals that can provide flexible, innovative and complete packages of care tailored to meet their needs” (Darlington, Feeney & Rixon, 2005b, p246) including financial resources for families where appropriate (Spath et al. 2008).

The formulation of legislation and policy as well needs to reflect an awareness of these issues by considering information sharing, privacy and confidentiality (Head, 2008; Howell, Kelly, Palmer & Mangum, 2004). In the NSW ‘Keep Them Safe’ report many of these issues have been tackled with a view to promoting the shared response to child safety and wellbeing. An example is the new information exchange processes to facilitate communication between agencies. The amended legislation, which was proclaimed on 30 October, 2009, enables agencies to share relevant information and requires agencies to co-ordinate with other organisations in promoting the safety, welfare and wellbeing of the child or young person. The information exchange provisions in the amended *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* clearly prioritise the safety, welfare and wellbeing of the child or young person over an individual's right to privacy. These changes have the full support of the Privacy Commissioner. In the context of interagency collaboration, review and evaluation of these issues should be ongoing.

Barriers to effective interagency collaboration

Addressing barriers to effective interagency collaboration, or promoting collaboration is more complex than just implementing what works as detailed above. Specific barriers may firstly need to be tackled directly (Head, 2008). Trust is a significant issue (Darlington & Feeney, 2008; Horwath & Morrison, 2007; Jones et al. 2007; Katz & Hetherington, 2006; Metcalfe et al. 2007) and deficits in communication, for example, have been found to contribute to worker mistrust (Darlington, Feeney & Rixon, 2005b; Head, 2008; Spath et al. 2008). This means that if communication has not been effective in the past it is not just about establishing appropriate communication avenues but firstly addressing potential lack of trust, or for example, creating readiness for change or, addressing resultant conflict (Dunlop & Holosko, 2004). Metcalfe et al. (2007) caution that trust may need to be built slowly and in stages. Until barriers are dealt with, communication strategies may not be effective.

The research has found a number of strategies helpful in addressing other barriers.

The individual worker can

- Do the work that sits behind being able to share understandings such as learning the language of other fields such as alcohol and other drugs, and mental health (Drabble, 2007; Green et al. 2008), and
- Be accessible evidenced by returning calls and making time for other agency staff (Spath et al. 2008)

The agency can

- Develop systems of ongoing contact with families and consumers which can be a source of new ideas, and information about strengths and weaknesses (Epps & Jackson, 2000) including canvassing the views of younger clients (Strolin-Goltzman et al. 2010). Initiatives include but are not limited to, conducting periodic parent focus groups, setting up an advisory panel with stakeholder representatives including parents, for example. Other processes to identify gaps

include use of datasets, parent surveys, project evaluations, and consultative processes used by government (Victoria Auditor-General's Office, 2007).

- Maintain a focus on client need rather than agency differences and 'territorial' issues (Witt & Wilburn, 2007). For example, joint training between police and child protection staff where there is a perception that police involvement results in worse outcomes for clients would logically be compromised. Cross et al. (2005) found that contrary to this very worker perception, the complementary skills of both groups were a strength, and that police involvement was positively associated with a range of different child protection interventions for victims across a number of abuse types and may have even promoted better interventions. This finding supports the contention by Head, (2008) of the importance of exploring staff ideologies and perspectives, and using an evidence base to tackle staff biases (Head, 2008). The importance of an evidence base has also been noted elsewhere.
- Use an evidence base, to inform training to ensure effectiveness (Charles & Horwath, 2009; Freeth & Reeves, 2004), inform organisational change (Horwath & Morrison, 2000), and to inform new practices (Conger & Ross, 2006; Epps & Jackson, 2000; Halliday, Asthana & Richardson, 2004; Head, 2008; Metcalfe et al. 2007). Conger & Ross, (2006) found an interesting result from a program evaluation. In trying to reduce the disparity in detention rates between non foster and foster youth by increasing communication with the Court, the initiative had an unwanted effect by increasing the disparity further. The authors concluded that increased communication possibly made the young people in foster care more 'visible' in comparison to their non foster counterparts. In addition they also concluded that the assumptions underlying the need for more communication were faulty. In addressing what may appear to be fragmentation in service delivery, collecting appropriate data to inform collaborative efforts in the first instance is vitally important.
- Actively managing staff morale by ensuring meetings that agency staff do attend are relevant, and having input into sector meeting agendas so that opportunities for sharing understanding or joint professional development are facilitated (Harlow & Shardlow, 2006).
- Ensure that the threat or challenge to existing roles due to the implementation of new strategies is minimised by building a sense of ownership through inclusion of staff in consultation processes, goal planning, and by valuing opinions and input (Head, 2008).
- Collect data to demonstrate the efficacy of particular interagency projects or initiatives as well as having a clear understanding of funding eligibility. Flemons et al. (2010) report on a project that aimed to facilitate restoration of children in foster care. The particular funding for specialised service delivery they sought for the project was only available while the children were in care and cut off as soon as the children were restored not allowing any follow up. In addition, although the interagency initiative had been a success, data had not been collected to demonstrate the efficacy of the project resulting in the evidence to justify further funding not being available. The authors concluded that these logistical issues had a significant impact. Due to lack of funding the initiative could not continue in the way it had.

Government

The literature has identified a number of 'big picture' issues that fall within the purview of government that when left unaddressed add to the difficulties in achieving successful interagency collaboration. Research has identified the importance of having "strong and competent leadership" (Jones et al. 2007, p. 65; Spath et al. 2008) in agencies that work closely with other agencies, for which the ongoing responsibility for professional development of those in charge is required.

Resource allocation processes such as the competitive nature of funding have been identified as an area that can often divide agencies (Metcalfe et al. 2007; Schrapel, 2004). Current thinking is around how funding allocations and funding agreements can promote agencies working together to increase purchasing power, such as having shared premises for meetings/training and

the like. Co-location of services has been found to have a positive impact on interagency collaboration (Katz & Hetherington, 2006).

The need to ensure the implementation of some kind of evaluative function in funding agreements, not only for monitoring but as evaluation has been shown to “maintain commitment on the part of collaborators and the target population” (Jones et al. 2007, p.65) and to focus rewards (Metcalfe et al. 2007) is deemed important.

The formulation of standards on how to coordinate services may go some way to addressing the complexity associated with many different players particularly when a number of bureaucracies may be involved each with their own different processes (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2006).

Conclusion

In conclusion communication features as one of the most salient variables in facilitating interagency collaboration with different roles and responsibilities being evident for the individual, agency or government. These are not mutually exclusive however as initiatives or strategies to be successful require all three levels to be working together in a collaborative way that both respects, and has the clients' interest at the forefront. Implementation of any initiative comes with the caveat that it must be evidence based as, to implement initiatives or strategies without good evidence or a clearly articulated rationale, may have an undesired effect. In addition, addressing barriers to effective collaboration may require specific strategies to address particular issues rather than being seen as the simple implementation of what works.

References

- Charles, M., & Horwath, J. (2009). Investing in interagency training to safeguard children: An act of faith or act or reason? *Children & Society*, 23, 364-376.
- Conger, D., & Ross, T. (2006). An outcome evaluation of a program for children in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 4(1), 97-115.
- Cross, T. P., Finkelhor, D., & Ormrod, R. (2005). Police involvement in child protective services investigations: Literature review and secondary data analysis. *Child Maltreatment*, 10(3), 224-244.
- Cunningham-Smith, V. (2004). Interagency collaboration: A mixed bag. *Developing Practice*, Autumn, 15-18.
- Darlington, Y., & Feeney, J. A. (2008). Collaboration between mental health and child protection services: Professionals' perception of best practice. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 30(2), 187-198.
- Darlington, Y., Feeney, J. A., & Rixon, K. (2005a). Interagency collaboration between child protection and mental health services: practices, attitudes and barriers. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29(10), 1085-1098.
- Darlington, Y., Feeney, J. A., & Rixon, K. (2005b). Practice challenges at the intersection of child protection and mental health. *Child and Family Social Work*, 10(3), 239-247.
- Drabble, L. (2007). Pathways to collaboration: Exploring values and collaborative practices between child welfare and substance abuse treatment fields. *Child Maltreatment*, 12(1), 31-42.
- Dunlop, J. M., & Holosko, M. J. (2004). The story behind the story of collaborative networks - Relationships do matter! *Journal of Health & Social Policy*, 19(3), 1-18.
- Earles, W., Doyle, J., Lee, A., Malthouse, D., & Selke, H. (2005). Stories from a third sector co-governance/multiple co-location trial: The Regional Outreach Support Program. *Third Sector Review*, 11(2), 117-135.
- Epps, S., & Jackson, B. (2000). Effecting change: Challenges to building integrated and

collaborative systems. In S. Epps & B. Jackson (Eds.), *Empowered families, successful children: Early intervention programs that work*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- Ervin, N. (2004). Assessing interagency collaboration through perceptions of families. *Journal of Community Health Nursing, 21*(1), 49-60.
- Fasoli, L., & Moss, B. (2007). What can we learn from 'innovative' child care services? Children's services purposes and practices in Australia's Northern Territory. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 8*(3), 265-274.
- Feiock, R. C., Steinacker, A., & Park, H. J. (2009). Institutional collective action and economic development joint ventures. *Public Administration Review, 69*(2), 256-270.
- Flemons, D., Liscio, M., Gordon, A. B., Hibel, J., Gutierrez-Hersh, & Rebholz, C. L. (2010). Fostering solutions: Bringing brief-therapy principles and practice to the child welfare system. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 36*(1), 80-95.
- Freeth, D., & Reeves, S. (2004). Learning to work together: Using the presage, process, product (3P) model to highlight decisions and possibilities. *Journal of Interprofessional Care, 18*(1), 43-56.
- Friedman, S. R., Reynolds, J., Quan, M. A., Call, S., Crusto, C. A., & Kaufman, J. S. (2007). Measuring changes in interagency collaboration: An examination of the Bridgeport Safe Start Initiative. *Evaluation And Program Planning, 30*(3), 294-306.
- Garrett, P. M. (2004). Talking child protection: The police and social workers 'working together'. *Journal of Social Work, 4*(1), 77-97.
- Green, B. L., Rockhill, A., & Burrus, S. (2008). The role of interagency collaboration for substance-abusing families involved with child welfare. *Child Welfare, 87*(1), 29-61.
- Halliday, J., Asthana, S. N. M., & Richardson, S. (2009). Evaluating partnership. *Evaluation 10*(3), 285-303.
- Han, M., Carnochan, S., & Austin, M. J. (2007). The challenges to promoting collaboration between child protection services workers and court professionals: An exploratory study of case records. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 1*(3), 115-131.
- Harlow, E., & Shardlow, S. M. (2006). Safeguarding children: Challenges to the effective operation of core groups. *Child and Family Social Work, 11*(1), 65-72.
- Harr, C., Souza, L., & Fairchild, S. (2008). International models of hospital interdisciplinary teams for the identification, assessment, and treatment of child abuse. *Social Work in Health Care, 46*(4), 1-16.
- Head, B. W. (2008). Assessing network-based collaborations: Effectiveness for whom? *Public Management Review, 10*(6), 733-749.
- Horwath, J. & Morrison, T. (2000). Identifying and implementing pathways for organizational change – Using the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* as a case example. *Child and Family Social Work, 5*, 245-254.
- Horwath, J. & Morrison, T. (2007). Collaboration, integration and change in children's services: critical issues and key ingredients. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 31*(1), 55-69.
- Howell, J. C., Kelly, M. R., Palmer, J., & Mangum, R. L. (2004). Integrating child welfare, juvenile justice and other agencies in a continuum of services. *Child Welfare, 83*(2), 143-156.
- Jones, J. M., Crook, W. P., & Reid Webb, J. (2007). Collaboration for the provision of services: A review of the literature. *Journal of Community Practice, 15*(4), 41-71.
- Katz, I., & Hetherington, R. (2006). Co-operating and communicating: A European perspective on integrating services for children. *Child Abuse review, 15*, 429-439.
- Krsevan, K., Dwyer, A. M., & Young, J. (2004). Interagency collaboration: A reflection from Families First. *Developing Practice, Autumn*, 8-14.

- Laming, L. (2009). *The protection of children in England: A progress report*. London: the Stationary Office.
- Metcalf, J., Riedlinger, M., McKenzie, M., & Cook, L. (2007). *Cross-sector collaboration for child and youth services*. West Perth, WA: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.
- Murphy, M., Shardlow, S. M., Davis, C., Race, D., Johnson, M., & Long, T. (2006). Standards - A new baseline for interagency training and education to safeguard children? *Child Abuse Review*, 15, 138-151.
- Schrapel, S. (2004). Interagency collaboration: Beyond the mantra. *Developing Practice, Autumn*, 5-7.
- Spath, R., Werrbach, G. B., & Pine, B. A. (2008). Sharing the baton, not passing it: Collaboration between public and private child welfare agencies to reunify families. *Journal of Community Practice*, 16(4), 481-507.
- Strolin-Goltzman, J., Kollar, S., & Trinkle, J. (2010). Listening to voices of children in foster care: Youths speak out about child welfare workforce turnover and selection. *Social Work*, 55(1), 47-53.
- Townsend, A., & Shelley, K. (2008). Validating an instrument for assessing workforce collaboration. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 32, 101-112.
- Victoria Auditor-General's Office (2007). *Giving Victorian children the best start in life*. Melbourne, Victoria: Victorian Government Printer.
- Willumsen, E. (2008). Interprofessional collaboration - A matter of differentiation and integration? Theoretical reflections based in the context of Norwegian childcare. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 22(4), 352-363.
- Witt, S. D., & Wilburn, V. R. (2007). "We're all winners here": The impact of collaborative efforts among social service agencies. *Education and Society*, 25(3), 69-81.
- Zetlin, A. G., Weinberg, L. A., & Shea, N. M. (2006). Seeing the whole picture: Views from diverse participants on barriers to educating foster youths. *Children & Schools*, 28(3), 165-173.