



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

For service workers: Collaboration and care between families and providers

Definitions

We know that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term ‘parent’ includes the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child. We also appreciate that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Money, housing and health

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who’ve experienced tough times to spark hope and new ideas for other families who need to access services.

Many of us who work or volunteer in frontline services have experienced things that get in the way of us being able to meet the families we support with patience, compassion, flexibility and respect. But there are always opportunities to:

- join with families, in ways big and small
- hold space for the difficulties they are up against
- find creative ways to partner with them in dignity rather than charity; and
- be reminded about why we came to the work in the first place.

Here we share stories of collaboration, care and overcoming barriers from families and workers which we hope will be a reminder of what’s possible.

Before you start, take a moment to think about...



- What are the ethics that drew you to this work?
- When do you feel most connected to those ethics in your practice?
- When do you feel most removed from these ethics? What can separate you from your preferred ways of working?

Naming some things that can get in the way

It can take courage to name the forces that separate us from dignified and responsive ways of working, but doing so opens up possibilities for transformative change. We may be up against different challenges depending on the workplace. These challenges may include:

- People accessing our service are required to fill out forms, which can reduce their identities and stories by equating them with categories and ticked boxes.
- Outcome measures can require us to focus our work together on what the organisation believes is important over what is important to the family we are supporting.
- Limitations about the duration or scope of service can mean we're expected to only respond to one discrete challenge at a time, as if mental health, physical health, housing, experiences of violence, substance abuse, community connection, cultural connection, etc are not all intricately interconnected. As a result we often cease working with people in moments when they still need support, and may feel that we're not really making a difference in the lives of those we support.
- Embedded cultural assumptions can trick us into believing that we are separate from or 'better than' those we support.
- Insufficient feedback and accountability mechanisms prevent us from hearing, in meaningful ways, about how our services have done harm, which in turn cuts off opportunities for repair and responsive change.

- Not having enough funding, training or support in the work, plus pressures around efficiency, can create unreasonable work demands, fatigue, stress and distress, while reducing opportunities for creativity and nourishing interpersonal interaction.

Some workers may also be experiencing discrimination and inequity in the workplace. And just like the families we support, if we too are navigating difficulties in our lives beyond work (such as financial stress, physical and mental health challenges, family relationship complexities or violence, stigma, isolation or loss) all of these things will shape how well we are able to show up for the families we support.

To read more about the difficulties families can experience when these forces remain unnamed or unaddressed, and their skills for getting through, check out [Skills for navigating services](#).

Take a moment to think about...



- What does it look like to stand together to challenge these forces?

Stories of collaboration and care from families

As you read the following stories of solidarity and support in times when families have accessed services, pay attention to what stands out to you.

Services seeing us as a family

'When I was going through some really s*** stuff, I was homeless and living in a refuge as a young single parent. My son was living between myself and my mum, so not with me all the time. The refuge staff still made sure that I had a family room and I had stuff for my son. They never assumed it was just me. They always assumed that my son could be with me. They gave me all the resources they had for supporting children, including linking me with a worker who worked with younger children. They were always consistent.'

When I left the refuge I had an outreach worker – my son still wasn't with me full time – but the outreach worker planned everything as though we were a family unit. That acknowledgment, that even though my son wasn't always with me physically, we were still a family; we would always be a family unit. They helped me with childcare, school, free tickets for family activities. They didn't deprive me of family resources just because I didn't have my child living with me at that moment. I was 21 at the time. They were amazing; I am so grateful to them. I'm now 25 and I look after my son full time. I can genuinely say if it wasn't for those services, I would not be able to be my son's sole guardian.'

Elliot, parent, Kaurua Country

Small things making a huge difference

'Once I went to a Centrelink office and the person I was speaking to looked at me and said, "Oh, this must be really tough for you!" I thought, "Yeah, it is really tough." I don't know if that was his exact words, but that's what the words he said meant, and that was huge. He also found out that I was being charged the highest amount for a debt repayment. And he said, "Oh, why don't we fix this right now?" and something along the lines of "How stupid is it that you're homeless and you're repaying the highest rate?!" So yeah, that was really helpful and so simple, you know, such a simple thing to do.'

Emi, parent, Ngarrindjeri Country

Caring and being honest

'There was one really helpful housing service – the way that they worked with us as a family, they were just upfront. We had an appointment in two weeks and they said, "Look, we can't help until then, but come back, we'll get you a house." We got a house in the meantime. When people were compassionate and listened and engaged with the awfulness of our situation and didn't tell me stupid stuff like "Why aren't the kids in school?" It made a difference.'

Emi, parent, Ngarrindjeri Country

Helping us with practical and emotional support

'We found that (the Department of) Human Services helped us. And I know that's not everybody's experience, but in times of crisis they stepped in and said, "What can we do? Are you willing to accept our help?" And we did. They did marvellous things for us. They linked us into all sorts of services, couples counselling, counselling for the kids. They even babysat our kids while we went to therapy sessions. At first I didn't want them in the family, I just thought they were gonna take my children away. But they actually helped, they supported us when I was in crisis and couldn't do anything. If we hadn't had somebody step in, the crisis would've just escalated.'

Ann, parent, Wurundjeri Country

Child focused support

'In the first refuge, the kids had their own worker as well, and that was significant for them, to have somebody who was separate from me who was just a children's worker. I kind of recognised that I had lost my faith in my ability to parent safely. And I recognised that I wasn't able to see what the kids needed because I was so traumatised. So it was actually a relief. I could kind of think, "Well, if worst comes to worst, this worker is gonna make the call that I can't parent my children any longer." And even though that didn't happen, I managed to hang onto them, it was a relief to know that somebody had that eye on things for my kids.'

Emi, parent, Ngarrindjeri Country

Family focused support

'Carers Gateway was a great one for us. When I was unwell, they came in and got me a support worker to take me out of the house so that I could actually be human, I guess. And then they also provided care and respite for the children as well. So that just helped the family. During those early years, it was really important to have those services, to support the family. When you can get services like that that are helpful and assist in doing your daily stuff, like taking the kids away for the day just to get them out into the fresh air and have a play and you can just go, "OK, I can relax for five minutes and not stress." It was just nice to have that break.'

Jason, parent, Lutruwita Country



RYAN, 7 YEARS OLD

Walking alongside me

'The Women's Information Service saved my life because I didn't have anyone to take with me to the court. And when I realised that service is available, that they send a female – it was like a really, really big support. Just someone to sit next to me because I didn't wanna sit in the courtroom alone.'

M, parent, Kurna Country

Caring about our children

'I remember we were at this family reunification meeting and child protection was saying all the s*** about us. And we ended up getting so angry that we just got up and walked out. And the advocate for our kids, she comes running out after us and she was like, "Hang on, hang on. Have a chat with me." And we stopped and had a cigarette and she said: "Let me tell you one thing." She goes, "Your kids really f***ing love you. And they really wanna come home." And I was just like, "Well, I will do whatever the f*** it takes to get them home." It was people like that.

They didn't care if we swore. They didn't care how we acted. She was more on our level. Not like, "I've got a degree – I'm better than you." They were more interested in actually helping us do the right thing.'

Rachael, parent, Kurna Country

Stories of collaboration and care from workers

We also heard from some service workers about the ways they have found to work in solidarity with families.

Taking a human rights approach

'What I try to do as a worker in a service for poor folks and families is work to change the culture from a charity model to one focused on human rights. Calling out (or in) co-workers who display classist or stigmatising views about people who access the service, hearing stories from people

who have had bad experiences with colleagues and validating that (through just sharing their experience with the colleague or referring it for a formal complaints process) and finding creative ways to tweak our reporting to allow us to deliver better frontline services, are all acts of resistance against the “us vs them” way of doing things.’

Mental health social worker, Kurna Country

Meeting families where they are at

‘One of my clients who is from a non-English speaking background rang an Australian government department wanting help to find out the safety of family overseas in a war-torn context and to find out about humanitarian supports and visa options. Despite my clients’ request to get an interpreter the worker for the department said, “Let’s just see as we go ... I might be able to understand you.” My client hung up without the information she rang for. We have been using her counselling sessions with a paid interpreter funded by our service to call the agencies she needs help from until we can get a better response.’

Family therapist, Kurna Country

Educating communities

‘Often when a mother is referred to our counselling service after having a child removed because of domestic violence, not only is she facing the harm of the abuse and the grief that comes with losing contact with a child; she has also been recruited into feelings of guilt and blame for this unimaginable reality by being told to: “Go and get counselling to stop the pattern of being attracted to or having relationships with violent men.” It has us realising that the main work is educating other practitioners and the broader community about the politics of abuse, power and control, and to stop blaming women.’

Family therapist, Kurna Country

Take a moment to think about...



- What stood out to you from reading these stories?
- What was it about your own experience that these stories reminded you of?
- What are the ways that reading these stories will support you in your work?

Further reading

- Reynolds, V. (2008). [An ethic of resistance: Frontline worker as activist](#). *Women Making Waves*, 19(1), 5.

More Money, housing and health resources

- Take a look at the [Practitioner guide: Money, housing and health resources](#)

AVAILABLE HERE

View all Money, housing and health resources



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