Working with Vulnerable Families – a partnership approach

Emeritus Professor Dorothy Scott

Improving the lives of vulnerable children
Workshop Overview

• “Vulnerable children” – who are they?
• What are the effects of vulnerability?
• A vision for working with vulnerable families
• Inspiring exemplars in early childhood field and their common characteristics:
  – relationship-based, child and family inclusive, culturally competent, collaborative and holistic
• the challenges and rewards of working with vulnerable families
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The child’s right to:

• provision
• protection
• participation
Who are “vulnerable” children?

Children and young people are vulnerable if the capacity of parents and family to effectively care, protect and provide for their long term development and wellbeing is limited.

Vulnerable Children Action Plan, Department of Education, Victoria 2014
Measures of child vulnerability

• Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)
• Children living in poverty
• Children in child protection system
• Children exposed to family violence
• Children with no parent in employment
• Children of parent(s) in prison
• Children of parents with complex problems eg alcohol/drug, mental illness, homelessness
Place Based Social Disadvantage

There is a strong correlation between:

• Local Government Areas with high levels of social disadvantage (SEIFA measures), and
• High levels of child protection reports, and
• Number of children identified as vulnerable in one or more domains of AEDI

Adverse Childhood Events (ACE)

- Parental substance abuse
- Parental separation/divorce
- Parental mental illness
- Battered mother
- Parental criminal behavior
- Psychological, physical or sexual abuse
- Emotional or physical neglect

(Fellitti & Anda 2010)
Fellitti & Anda 1998

% Reporting Alcoholism

No. of Adverse Childhood Events

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ACE and Attempted Suicide

% Ever Attempting Suicide

No. of Adverse Childhood Events

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The big challenge ... 

“The challenge of ending child abuse is the challenge of breaking the link between adults’ problems and children’s pain.”

(UNICEF, A League Table of Child Maltreatment Deaths in Rich Nations, 2008)
Parental characteristics of children entering out-of-home care in 2007

Parental substance abuse 69.4%
Domestic Violence 65.2%
Parental mental health problems 62.6%

the source of a vision....
... the realization of a vision
Exemplars of Visionary Innovation

• PaL – parentsandlearning.com
• VICSEG New Futures – vicsegnewfutures.org.au
• Doveton College – dovetoncollege.gov.edu
• Child and Family Centres, education.tas.gov.au/parents_carers/early_years/Programs-and-Initiatives/Pages/Child-and-Family-Centres.aspx
Parents and Learning, Napranum
VICSEG New Futures

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Doveton College

Family & Community

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Child and Family Centres

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What do these have in common?

They are all:

1. Relationship-based
2. Family inclusive
3. Culturally competent
4. “Joined up” with other services, and
5. Holistic
1. Relationship-based Practice

In relationship-based practice with vulnerable families and their children, we are the instrument of our own practice. How do we care for and fine tune this instrument? How do we sustain ourselves in our work? What are the elements in the relationship which nurture G R O W T H?
GROWTH

Genuineness

Respect

Optimism

Warmth

Trust

Humility
The “ecology” of relationships

Organisational Setting

Parent

Educator

Child

Community Context

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The importance of ‘therapeutic relationships’

40% Client factors and environmental factors (e.g. social support)
30% Qualities of the therapeutic relationship
15% Hope and expectancy of positive outcome
15% Specific intervention of technique

From The Handbook of Psychology Integration by M.J. Lambert, 1992, P97.

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So, how well are we...

1. reducing social stressors and strengthening social support?

2. offering a relationship-based service?

3. using evidence-informed practice?

4. nurturing hope?
2. Family Inclusive
...because we have left him out of the picture – yet again!
A mother’s shame ...

I didn’t have to pretend that I was anything that I wasn’t ... I didn’t have my defensive wall up. I didn’t have to lie about my life or where I lived or what my circumstances were, or had been.      Mother
3. Culturally Competent

1. Awareness of one’s own cultural worldview.

2. Attitude towards cultural differences.

3. Knowledge of different cultural practices.

4. Cross-cultural skills.
4. Joined Up Services

- Universal Services for all Children
- Targeted Services for Vulnerable Children and Families
- Statutory Services such as Child Protection
- Adult Specialist Services

- Children in State Care
  - Disability
  - Family violence
  - Drug and alcohol services
  - Homelessness services
  - Mental Health Services
  - Correctional services
Effective Collaboration Preconditions

White and Winkworth (2013)

Authority

Values

Capacity
Sources of conflict in collaboration (Scott, 2005)

- Inter-organisational
- Intra-organisational
- Inter-professional
- Inter-personal
- Intra-psychic

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Scapegoating “the other”

“Inter-agency or inter-professional conflict is worse in bad cases. What happens is you see the other person as having the solution, you can’t fix it so you imagine they can fix it, so you blame them for not fixing it and then get angry ... I could see that all over the place.”

Interviewee in a study of interaction between child protection and mental health staff by Arney, Lange & Zufferey (2010) p. 187
5. Holistic practice

1. ‘core role only’ (‘it’s not my concern’)
2. ‘core role plus assessment of ‘other needs’, leading to referral’ (‘it’s a concern but someone else’s job – refer on’)
3. ‘other needs incidental but unavoidable’ (‘not my core role but I have to do it’)
4. ‘other needs’ intrinsic part of core role (‘it’s part and parcel of my job’)

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Challenges in working with vulnerable children and their families

• The stresses of “emotional work” and witnessing the vulnerability of children
• Dealing with parents’ feelings and actions
• Having supportive clinical consultation to debrief and reflect on what we are doing
• Continuity of relationships with children and their families
• Competing work demands
My journey in serving vulnerable children
What values guide me?

How is my work part of who I am?

What inspires and sustains me?
In conclusion, we need to ...

1. Nurture a vision for reducing children’s vulnerability

2. Work with vulnerable families in ways that are: relationship-based; family inclusive; culturally competent; collaborative; and holistic, and last but never least

3. Value and cherish the vocation and the passion of those who work with vulnerable children and their families.
References


Emeritus Professor Dorothy Scott
Australian Centre for Child Protection
University of South Australia

dorothy.scott@unisa.edu.au
www.unisa.edu.au/childprotection