

Resource sheet

Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse

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Prevention and early intervention in strengthening families and relationships: Challenges and implications

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The focus of service delivery in the health and wellbeing sector has shifted in recent years, from a deficit-based model to a more positive orientation in which strengths and resources are recognised and emphasised. This has led to an increased interest in the key characteristics of “successful” individuals and families, to inform the development of effective service delivery. However, while this emphasis clearly has merit, the current service environment caters mainly for those already experiencing difficulties. While concentrating on strengths in times of difficulties is important, effective preventative efforts that focus on support, skills, knowledge and assistance prior to problems occurring is also needed.

Key characteristics

The key characteristics that are seen in the literature as being important in a broad overview of family and relationship wellbeing are shown in Box 1 and Box 2.

Box 1

Elements of a strong partner relationship/marriage may include:

- both partners are satisfied and want it to continue;
- commitment—a long-term view of the relationship;
- positive and respectful communication;
- conflict resolution skills;
- interaction and time together, including balance of couple and individual time;
- intimacy and emotional support;
- deep friendship, mutual respect and enjoyment of each others' company; and
- daily expressions of affection.

See pages 2–3 of Issues Paper 2 for more information.

Box 1 shows a range of possible characteristics of strong partner relationships. Box 2 outlines some of the factors linked to family wellbeing. The characteristics of family and relationship wellbeing can help to inform the goals of preventative programs for family and relationship service providers.

It is important to bear in mind that what constitutes family wellbeing is influenced by the difficulties associated with defining family. Modern families are complex, and different family members may view family in different ways. Therefore, certain factors may be more or less important for varying family types and structures.

Barriers to accessing information and resources to strengthen families

One of the fundamental questions that lies behind preventative work in the area of family and relationship wellbeing is what factors may influence a person to

Box 2

Elements of family wellbeing may include:

- physical safety and physical and mental health;
- supportive intra-family relationships, including love/affection, time together, quality time, communication, support, happiness, acceptance, interdependence, sharing activities, commitment, resilience;
- social connections outside of the family;
- economic security and independence; and
- effective parenting.

See page 4 of Issues Paper 2 for more information.

For more information, see:

www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/issues/issues2.html#couplewellbeing
www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/issues/issues2.html#familywellbeing

seek help to strengthen relationships. Little work has been carried out that focuses on these factors, but the literature on help-seeking behaviour, while largely focused on existing mental health issues, offers some clues regarding influences on help-seeking behaviour in general. The following barriers are highlighted (pp. 5–7 of Issues Paper 2):

- **Stigma:** associated with receiving help for health issues.
- **Gender:** men are seen as less willing to receive help, or if willing to receive help, don't know where to find it or see services as the domain of women and children. Women may be reluctant to seek help in situations related to family violence.
- **Culture:** for example, some Indigenous Australians may perceive services, particularly government services, as external interference; limited resources are available to adapt existing programs to be more culturally relevant.
- **Other issues:** for example, absence of a "crisis point"; relationships seen as private; programs seen as intrusive; time required; cost; lack of awareness of services; transport issues; lack of disabled access.

Individual/family and service-level responses to encourage healthy relationships

(p. 7 of Issues Paper 2)

The following are some suggestions from the literature about how to address barriers to accessing preventative healthy relationship programs:

- Provision of universal programs that increase protective factors. Schools are an ideal host for programs for children and young people, and online initiatives show promise, particularly for adolescents. Strategies for adults are more complex and often need to be multifaceted.
- A higher profile is needed for programs such as the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP), with services positioned as resources that make "good sense" to access. Intersectoral collaboration between family and relationship services and marketing/promotion and information technology services would help in the promotion of programs.
- Information campaigns should highlight areas of consensus in the literature on key indicators of family wellbeing that will help initiate common conversations among service providers, policy makers and families.

- Program level initiatives: for example, conducting programs in a venue not associated with relationship services; locating programs in places that men already attend.

Macro-level responses to healthy relationships

(p. 9 of Issues Paper 2)

Macro-level considerations in the need for preventative programs for relationship and family wellbeing include:

- Funding tensions between responding to the need for tertiary-level interventions while adequately resourcing prevention and early-intervention programs.
- Family policies need to incorporate and understand the many layers of meaning around family, and that complexities and contradictions in policies may be necessary and appropriate to address different attitudes, needs and family types.
- Policies to support families need to be reflected in a range of sectors (e.g., employment, industrial relations, transport) and services (e.g., child care, education).
- Tensions between fostering social conditions that best support families in fulfilling key functions, while meeting the needs of individual members, need to be considered.
- A need for further longitudinal study to clarify factors that promote the sustainability of gains from preventative programs.

Conclusions

Many challenges are faced in encouraging people to access help in strengthening relationships, including a range of barriers to participation, the complexity of family relationships, and a lack of comprehensive evaluations of preventative programs. Factors such as the stigma surrounding help-seeking may also play a considerable role in an individual's willingness to access preventative programs.

A multifaceted approach is most likely to work, based on a "family wellbeing framework" that acknowledges and respects the diversities and strengths of the many different types of families in contemporary Australia.



Australian Government

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The Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC) is an information and advisory unit funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The Clearinghouse aims to enhance family relationships across the lifespan by offering a resource and a point of contact for providers of family relationship and support services, policy makers and members of the research and broader communities. The Clearinghouse collects, synthesises and disseminates information on family relationships and facilitates networking and information exchange.

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