



Evaluation of the Pilot Strengthening Families Programme Changing Trax Newcastle

Executive Summary

October 2007

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Background

‘Changing Trax’ is a family intervention service funded by Newcastle Neighbourhood Renewal and line managed by Newcastle City Council.

As part of the Changing Trax service, the Strengthening Families Project offers families access to the ‘Strengthening Families Programme’ (SFP 10-14, UK), a seven-week family skills programme for mothers, fathers, carers and young people aged 10 – 14 years. The SFP 10-14 (UK) has been adapted for UK audiences (Allen et al, 2006). The programme aims to increase resilience for families living with a number of risk factors, including alcohol and substance misuse, depression, violence and aggression and underachievement in school. A recent World Health Organisation Cochrane Collaboration Systematic Review found the Strengthening Families Programme to be an effective preventative intervention for this target group of families (Foxcroft et al. 2003). Recent therapeutic practice reports have found positive outcomes for UK families taking part in the Strengthening Families Programme (see Coombes et al. 2006 for summary). Newcastle City Council commissioned an evaluation of the delivery and impact of the Pilot Strengthening Families Programme delivered within the Changing Trax service.

Methodology

The evaluation qualitatively explored the *process* of programme delivery and utilised both quantitative and qualitative approaches to measure the *outcome* of the pilot Strengthening Families programme for stakeholders. The methods for, and process of, data collection for the evaluation were collaboratively developed between the evaluator, the facilitators, Strengthening Families Project and Changing Trax. This collaborative approach was to ensure ownership of the evaluation findings for stakeholders.

Sample

The study focused on the first Strengthening Families Programme to be delivered within the Strengthening Families Project in the Changing Trax service. Using a purposive sampling strategy, all mothers, fathers, carers (n=4) and young people (n=4) participating within the pilot Strengthening Families Programme were included in the evaluation. All facilitators delivering the programme (n=5) and managers (n=2) also participated in the evaluation. Each participant was invited to take part in the evaluation through a process of informed consent.

Methods

Quantitative data on the outcome of the programme for families was gathered via pre- and post-programme standardised assessments on family functioning (FACES II; Olson et al., 1982) and young people’s strengths and difficulties (The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; Goodman, 1997). The qualitative methods of retrospective focus groups and interviews, using the Appreciative Inquiry approach (Reed, 2007), were conducted with programme participants, facilitators and managers in order to explore the process of programme delivery and reflect in more depth on the outcomes for participants.



Important Ingredients in Delivering the Strengthening Families Programme



Facilitators, managers, parents and young people shared their perspectives on “what worked” within the pilot Strengthening Families Programme, in order to build on this effective practice, share lessons learned and inform future programme delivery. Bringing together these shared perspectives has created a set of “Important Ingredients” for delivering the Strengthening Families Programme.

Facilitator Skill Set

The skills and expertise of the facilitators were found to be central to the successful delivery of the Programme, including;

- Skill and expertise in family work
- Solution-focused methods
- Approach to families:
 - Communication skills
 - Non judgemental
 - Non threatening
 - Sense of humour
 - Valuing people
- Understanding how to engage people in learning process
- Ability to foster successful, collaborative working relationships within facilitation team
- Shared values and definitions on key issues re: family work

Parents, young people and managers praised the skills and expertise of the facilitators;

The time and effort the facilitators contributed was immensely important. I don't think anyone had any idea of what would be involved prior to the course. I have no doubt that the skills the facilitators brought to the course as well as their approach to working with families and each other was crucial to the success of this course.

Coordinator

I really like it here and I really like [the facilitators] and I think they deserve their jobs! They were talking to us and listening.

Young person

All of them running the groups were fantastic weren't they?

Parent

Facilitator resources

- Five facilitators, male and female
- Time to meet and plan

If you want to deliver a first class, effective programme you have got to have time to meet with the others, you've got to know which part of the programme you're developing.

Facilitator

Addressing programme challenges

Using their skill sets, facilitators were able to address some of the inherent challenges within the programme, namely the tight time constraints (e.g. 3 minutes to complete an exercise), the reliance on literacy and the middle class, American bias, ensuring relevancy for the families attending the programme and encouraging their engagement.

Information sharing

Facilitators and parents highlighted the importance of 'knowledge transfer' at various points in the programme; from referrers to facilitators at the beginning of the programme, from facilitators to

families during the programme, and from facilitators to follow-up practitioners during and after the programme, in order to support families' transfer of learning and the embedding of this learning into their every day lives.

Practicalities

As with any parenting programme, the practicalities of the programme were also highlighted as an important ingredient in its successful delivery and outcomes for families;

- Venue: Neutral and welcoming
- Transport: To and from sessions
- Childcare provision
- Refreshments

Outcomes for Families

Outcomes for families were assessed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Parents and young people completed pre- and post- programme assessments, and retrospective interviews and focus groups with facilitators, managers, parents and young people explored the many outcomes for families attending the programme.

Family cohesion and adaptability

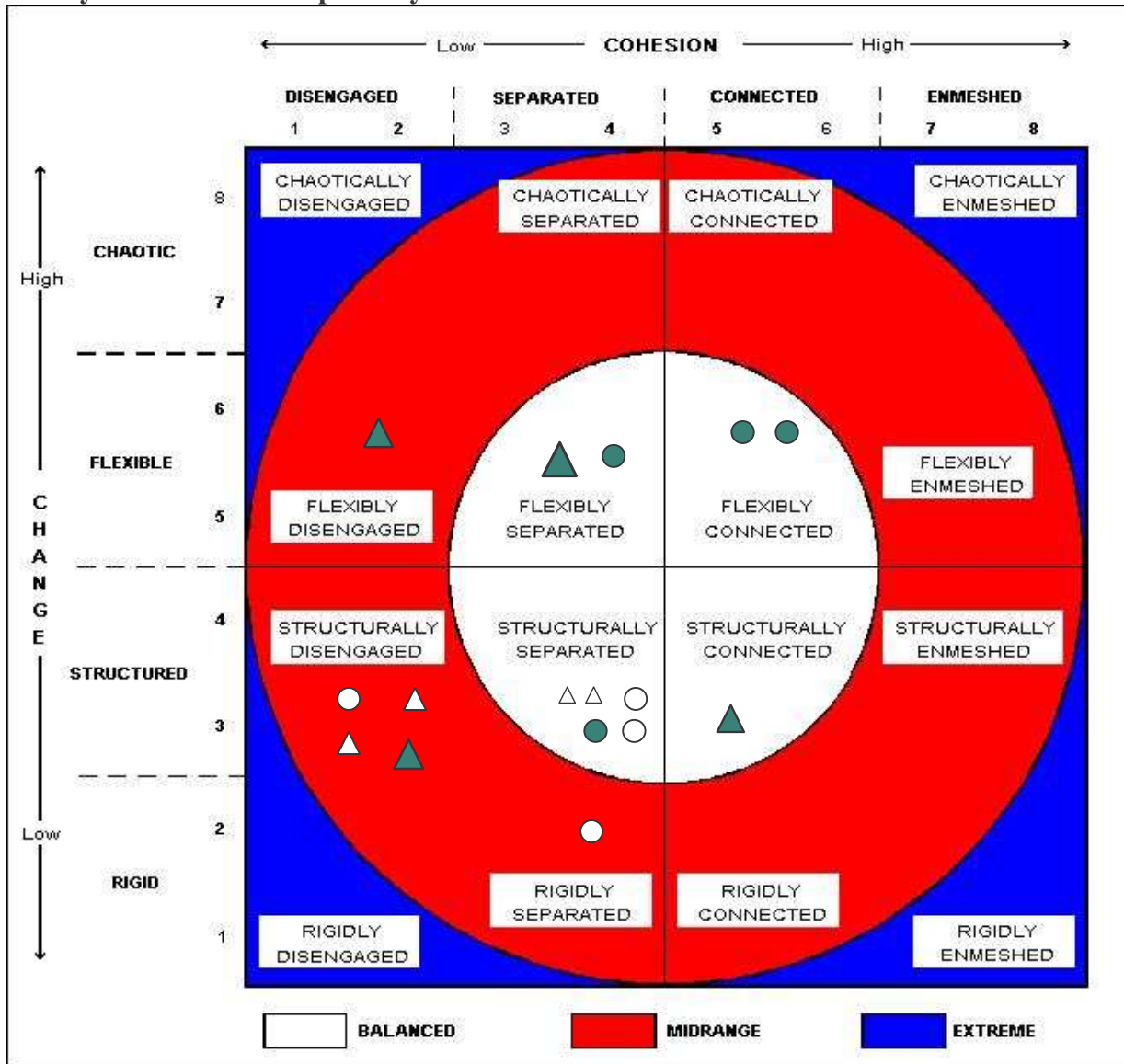


Figure 1: Mean pre- and post-intervention scores from the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale (FACES II; Olson et al, 1982)

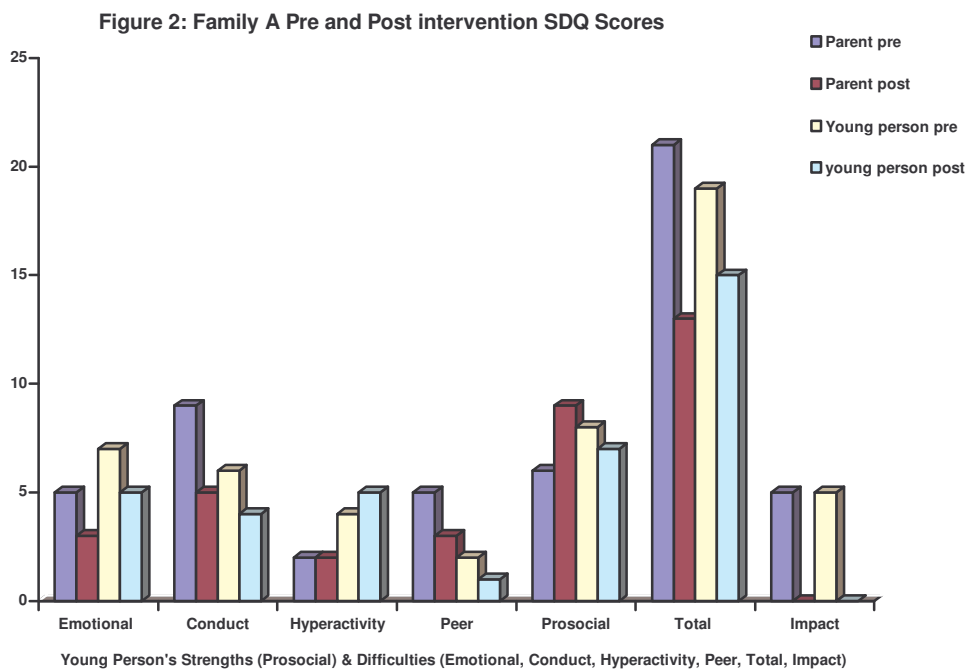
- △ Young person pre-intervention
- ▲ Young person post-intervention
- Parent pre-intervention
- Parent post-intervention

Before taking part in the intervention, parents and young people described their families as having low levels of cohesion and low levels of ability to adapt to change. Figure 1 shows that families' scores were all located within the low cohesion and low adaptability quadrant (bottom left hand quadrant), with 50% falling within the balanced range and 50% in the midrange, illustrating greater than typical levels of need. Parents and young people described their families as separated and disengaged from each other, and felt they were structured and inflexible in their approach to problem solving and adapting to change.

After taking part in the Strengthening Families Programme, a significant, positive shift is seen in their scores. Figure 1 shows that although one parent and one young person's scores remained within the low cohesion and low adaptability quadrant, the majority of scores moved to the "high adaptability", upper half of the graph, showing that parents and young people now viewed their families as flexible and capable in adapting to change. Low cohesion scores also shifted to reveal that 2 parents and one young person felt their families were more cohesive after they had participated in the programme. Despite some families maintaining feelings of low cohesion, 90% of parents and young people's scores fell within the balanced, i.e. 'typical' range, after taking part in the programme, compared to only 50% prior to the programme.

Young People's Strengths and Difficulties

Results from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) show a significant increase in young people's pro-social behaviour and abilities to make and sustain friendships, and a significant decrease in their emotional difficulties (e.g. anxiety and unhappiness) after attending the programme. Parents and young people also reported some decreases in young people's hyperactivity and conduct difficulties. In particular, a significant decrease was found in the young person's overall difficulties and the impact these difficulties had for the whole family. Figure 2 illustrates Family A's scores, as an example;



Qualitative Data

Positive experiences

Facilitators highlighted the fact that the programme provided a positive experience for parents and young people;

The thing is, none of the programme says “you’re really bad parents” it’s not “this is what you should do”, it’s people discussing it together; “oh well I tried this or that”. So for them I think it’s probably been really positive for them that they haven’t been condemned. They’ve been given some new skills that’s given them the confidence to move on to do new things.

It’s great if you think that once a week you’re going to go to a place where there’s no hassle and everything that’s said to you is going to be positive, and you’re going to be complimented and you’re going to chant that you’re a strong young person who’s got goals and you’re going to practice how you’re going to get those goals and you’re going to have time with your mam or dad, then you’re going to be taken there and taken back and it’s lovely and I think if that’s all they get out of it, that’s an awful lot to get for that group of young people.

Facilitators

Structure / routine

Facilitators highlighted that the programme became a routine for families who do not typically experience routine or boundaries. This structure was found to enable families’ learning and development.

Time out together

The programme provided the parent and the young person with time and space to be together, away from their family environment where they typically do not have the opportunity to spend one-to-one time together;

Just having an hour together, just having that time that they could spend with that one child, especially when they come from [having] four or five kids. And especially when the child is the oldest one and there’s a lot of responsibility put on them for childcare and all the other things.

Facilitator

Promoting communication

Participants described the ways the programme had supported the development of communication for individual family members, and within whole families, by increasing listening skills, patience and empathy.

Improvements in relationships

Parents and young people reported marked improvements in their relationships; describing increases in the quality and quantity of communication they experienced within their family, and improvements in their interactions and friendships with others.

I enjoyed coming here. Me and my mam spend more quality time together. Before we never, but now we do. We didn’t used to talk to each other, but now we do.

Young Person

She’s starting to tell me where she’s going more now, who she’s going with, coming in at a sensible time, whereas before it was just any time.

Parent

Emotional availability

Families described the improvements in their ability to share emotions with each other, and an increased sense of being closer as a family;

I realised I didn't tell my daughter I loved her enough, that was hard.

Parent

There was a lot more cuddling and physical contact that I noticed from the beginning of the programme to the end of the programme and I just think that there was that feeling "I'm getting on"... that bonding.

Facilitator

Friendships

Parents appreciated the friendships they had made with the other parents within the programme, and planned to continue these friendships beyond the programme;

Oh yes, we're all going to meet up for a night out soon...we all got on so well.

Parent

Young people felt the programme had supported their social interactions with peers, particularly the approaches they had learned which help reduce stress and anger, and enable the young person to disengage from activities and friendships that they are uncomfortable with;

I felt better about knowing what to say when you don't want to do something, if you want to make different choices [from your friends].

Young Person

Self efficacy: young people

Young people reported that taking part in the programme had helped them to feel less anxious and isolated, since they were able to see that other young people also experience a similar range of thoughts and emotions. The programme had introduced different approaches to manage their stress and anger levels, which had helped them to feel more in control of their emotions and of their responses to the world around them, therefore, giving them an increased sense of self-efficacy;

It helped me when I was feeling stressed. There's different things you can do, with your behaviour, to stop you feeling stressed, when you feel like you're getting stressed you can stop it.

Young Person

Self efficacy: parents

Parents reported an increase in their own self-efficacy, where they felt reassured that their experiences in parenting were not unique to them, that the challenges and difficulties they experienced were often shared by many other parents. Parents reflected that sharing experiences and approaches with each other was a positive way to share anxieties and concerns, as well as hints and tips, and also increased parents' confidence that they were not the only parents to have experienced these concerns;

We have a laugh! We had a good chat with each other and things like that. You don't always believe other people have problems with their kids, even when they say they do. It's not till you sit down with other people and discuss it with them. Some people don't like to say they've got problems with their kids. If you've got a problem, and someone else is talking about theirs, you might as well not sit there and say "oh no, my bairn's perfect!"

Parent

Future Plans

Young people had the opportunity to reflect on their goals for the future, and to discuss the possible steps they would need to take to achieve these goals, therefore increasing their locus of control within the wider world.

It made them think about their goals, that there is something five years down the line, and what you're doing now affects where that's going to be. So some of them have got that concept, you know, "if I don't stick in at school, where I want to be isn't going to happen".

Facilitator

Similarly, parents stated that attending this programme had given them the confidence and information/options to support them planning for the future, for themselves and for their children;

I've told all my kids that they've got to stick in at school till they're 18. And get a job or go to college and get a proper job. Or an apprenticeship, where you go to college and you've got a job.

I'm going to go and do my maths and English now. Get qualifications that'll help me more when I'm going for jobs. I wouldn't have had the confidence to go and do that before [this programme]. I wouldn't have thought of it.

Parents

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Pilot Strengthening Families Programme was found to be highly effective. The pre and post-programme assessments, completed by both parents and young people, indicated significant increases in young people's pro-social behaviour and abilities in making and sustaining friendships. The results showed significant decreases in the young people's anxiety and unhappiness, and for some young people, there were marked decreases in hyperactivity and conduct difficulties. The majority of families reported significant decreases in the young person's overall difficulties, and subsequently, significant improvements on the "whole-family impact" of these difficulties. Many families reported the overall difficulties and the impact of these difficulties to be so severe before the programme, that they fell within the "abnormal" range, and indicated predisposition to many clinical disorders. Following the programme, these overall difficulties and resulting impact had fallen within the "normal" range. Parents and young people both reported significant improvements in their families' adaptability and cohesiveness, reporting greater flexibility and less rigidity within their families' approach to life, including problem solving and adapting to change. The results also show an increase for some families in their feelings of closeness and cohesiveness.

The decreases in young people's difficulties and the increases in families' flexibility and cohesiveness were reiterated and further evidenced within the qualitative data, where parents and young people described the many positive outcomes for themselves and their families as a result of attending the programme. The key outcomes included; increased abilities in communication, empathy and emotional availability; feeling supported and appreciated, learning about new approaches that were relevant in the family's own context (solution-focused), increased feelings of self-efficacy, i.e. feeling more competent and able in their roles as parents or as young people interacting in their families and the world around them; and planning for the future. Facilitators and managers echoed these outcomes in their own discussions of the developments and learning that the families have evidenced within the Strengthening Families Programme.

Facilitators, managers and families all appreciated that the programme incorporated both parents and young people, providing more of a "whole family" approach than is afforded by other parenting programmes on the market. "Time out" for a parent and young person to spend together,

away from their demanding family context, was particularly valued. The routine and structure imposed by the programme was found to enable learning and development for individuals and families.

Key facilitator skills were identified as central to the successful delivery and outcomes of the programme, including; experience and skill in solution-focused family work, skills in engaging people in the learning process, shared values and definitions in family work and effective team working; identifying strengths and working collaboratively to plan and deliver the sessions. This skill set was vital in identifying effective approaches to facilitate learning in the face of inherent challenges within the programme, namely the tight time constraints, reliance on literacy abilities and the American, middle-class bias within the DVDs. In addition to this skill set, the importance of facilitator resources was highlighted, namely time to meet and plan and funding for five, mixed gender facilitators per programme. Knowledge transfer between referrers and facilitators, and between facilitators and practitioners working with each family, was a key ingredient in supporting families to effectively transfer the learning from the programme into their every day lives. Follow-up work was emphasised as pivotal in the success of the programme, particularly for families living with a number of difficulties and risk factors. The facilitation and follow-up work was reiterated time and time again by many participants as key to ensuring families' learning within the programme, and the translation, sustaining and embedding of this complex learning into families' everyday lives;

A programme is only as good as the facilitation and the follow-up work that happens afterwards.

Facilitator

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