Strengthening Families Programme: An Inter-agency Approach to Working with Families

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Summary: This article describes the authors’ experience of a Strengthening Families skills programme delivered in the Ballymun area of Dublin from March to June 2008. This was an inter-agency initiative that brought together partners from the community, voluntary and statutory sectors. The Ballymun Network for Assisting Children and Young People (the Network) – a forum for statutory, voluntary and community agencies – had already identified the difficulties experienced by many young people and their families in the area. The Network, already working from an inter-agency, interdisciplinary ethos, was attracted to the Strengthening Families Programme as it is evidence-based and operated on a systemic model functioning on an inter-agency basis. The goal for the network in piloting the Strengthening Families Programme was to improve the wellbeing of young people and their families.

Keywords: Strengthening families, inter-agency, probation, teens and families.

Introduction

The Strengthening Families Programme (SFP) was originally developed in the USA in the early 1980s as a 14-session skills training programme for families with children at risk because of substance-abusing parents. Research evaluations since 1983 indicate positive outcomes for improvement in parenting skills, children’s social competencies, reduction in alcohol and drug use, and delinquency (Kumpfer et al., 2002).

The Ballymun area has a history of high population density in a small urban area of Dublin city, with unemployment and many social problems identified therein. In recent years, through the regeneration programme,

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many agencies – statutory and community – have been striving to improve the environment, physically and socially, for the people living there.

The Ballymun Network for Assisting Children and Young People (the Network) is a forum for statutory, voluntary and community agencies working in Ballymun to share information and work together to improve service delivery. The Network began as an initiative of the Ballymun Local Drugs Task Force (BLDTF) in 2005. It comprises 17 agencies and its aim is to promote the welfare and protection of children and young people at risk in the 10–18 age group through better inter-agency cooperation. In November 2007, the Network invited the different agencies to come together to consider the value of running an SFP in the area. This meeting was after many agencies had been on a two-day facilitation training course together for the SFP in October 2007.

The network had already identified the needs in the community and the value of a systemic approach in assisting families. The Local Drug Task Force sought funding for the programme at the request of the Network. The Network is an independent forum in Ballymun, not under the authority of the Drug Task Force. The SFP is of interest to agencies because it is for the whole family, it offers skills to families rather than treating them for their problems, and it functions on an inter-agency basis.

**The Strengthening Families Programme**

The programme involves the whole family in three sessions run on the same night once a week. The parents or guardians of high-risk youth attend the SFP Parent training session in the first hour. At the same time the adolescents attend the SFP Teen Skills training session. In the second hour, the families participate in an SFP Family Skills training session. An important aspect of the programme is the meal that families and facilitators share at the beginning of the evening. The programme content includes positive communication, problem-solving, relationships, setting limits, alcohol, drugs and anger management.

**The beginning of SFP in Ballymun**

The authors, part of Young Persons’ Probation (YPP) in Dublin, attended multi-agency training on the SPP in October 2007 having
signed up to the initiative and attended an interagency meeting in November 2007, involving professionals from the Health Service Executive (HSE), The Drugs Task Force, De Paul Trust and Ballymun Jobs Club; to discuss implementing an SFP programme in Ballymun as soon as possible.

First and foremost families had to be recruited before any programme could take place. Due to time constraints the recruitment of the first cohort of families came from families known to the participating agencies. Careful consideration had to be given to the dynamics of all families that were referred. The ages of the teens in the family were important and also information around possible conflict that may be going on between families in the community. The health and safety of all participants and professionals involved in the programme had to be taken into account when planning for the programme. This involved obtaining information on each family from referrers and practicalities of the premises and the delivery of the programme.

The roles of each member of the staff group involving facilitators, support staff and the co-ordinator had to be allocated. From our experience of working with young people it was agreed that YPP would facilitate the teen sessions along with a member from the HSE. The family sessions were facilitated by teen and parent facilitators.

The planning for the programme involved four four-hour sessions. This time was spent to recruit, plan and prepare. Part of the planning involved troubleshooting possible issues that might arise, including use of mobile phones, behaviour issues and alcohol/drug misuse. Part of the programme involved incentives for the teens and families, therefore the facilitators needed to decide on an incentive that was going to encourage participation. The incentives decided on included mobile phone credit and shopping vouchers. This appeared to work well on this occasion.

Because the programme was written in America, a process of adapting it to local culture and language took place while maintaining programme integrity. Some of the language, for instance, had to be adapted to suit young people and adults participating in the programme. It was felt that the fewer barriers the facilitators had to cross, the more effective the programme would be.

Policies around drugs and alcohol and health and safety issues had to be discussed and agreed. This involved a plan to be put in place if a young person or adult arrived for the programme under the influence. The support staff and co-ordinator played an important role in this
instance. Other important practical issues included sourcing a chef and deciding a menu. The kitchen space had to be organised and extra tables and chairs sought. People were provided with transport, which involved sourcing a reliable taxi company to provide transport each week for those that needed it. Finally, materials needed for each session had to be bought and stored in a safe place.

**How the SFP ran**

Ten families were recruited for the programme. These families were referred from the HSE, a local secondary school, the Probation Service, the Jobs Club and the De Paul Trust. Nine of the families started and eight families completed the 14-week programme. The make-up of the teen group included six girls and three boys ranging from 13 to 15 years old. The parents group was made up of one man and eight women. One couple attended the programme.

Each week the facilitators, the co-ordinator and the support staff met for three hours prior to the programme start time. During this time feedback was given on the previous week’s session and anything that might have come up during the week for any of the families involved. The co-ordinator would deliver any significant information that needed to be shared before the programme began. The facilitators of each group would meet up and prepare their session for the evening. This involved gathering the relevant materials and practising the session for the particular week. Any adjustments that needed to be made to the programme would be carried out during this time.

At 6 p.m. all the families would arrive by taxi, by bus, by car or on foot. The families would sit together and eat a two-course meal together. Facilitators would sit with the families during meal times and try to make this time as comfortable as possible. After the meal, at 6.45 p.m., the parents and teens separated into their groups. The teens went to one room and parents to another along with their facilitators.

At the start of each session a review of the week before took place involving the young people’s participation, recalling what was covered the previous week. Each week a new topic was covered and discussed. Varied methods of programme delivery were used to deliver the programme material and to make it as interesting and interactive as possible. Role plays, flip charts, handouts, games and group discussion were all used as methods of delivery. Every week the group would be given a small piece of homework to do based on what was covered that evening.
While the teen group was going on, the parents group was running simultaneously covering similar material to the teens. This all came together in the family sessions. After a short break the teens and parents came together for the family session. This session involved a facilitator from the parents’ session and one from the teen session.

The sessions began each week with a review of the family practice that was given the previous week. The material for that week was covered using some of the methods mentioned above, using a lot of role-play and open discussion. These sessions gave the families an opportunity to practise some of the skills they had learned in previous sessions. These exercises provided a safe place for the teens and parents to communicate with each other. All open discussions were facilitated by the facilitators and we were there to act as mediators as deemed appropriate. Each session would end by asking the families to practise or carry out a task during the week. Family time was something that was introduced to the families in the family sessions, and they were asked to spend family time as a task each week. This involved making time to meet together and carrying out an activity or just spending time with each other. It was encouraged that the activity was suggested by the teen.

In week 14 all eight families attended one final session before graduating from the programme. The graduation ceremony is a special occasion where extended family members are invited to join in the celebration. Professionals from referral agencies and from the local community are also invited to this special evening. Each participant received a certificate, and some people spoke on behalf of the teens and the parents.

**Challenges/Limitations**

Some of the main challenges with the SFP concern the attendance and participation of families. Of the nine families that began the SFP, only one family failed to return on week 2. All the other eight families successfully completed all 14 weeks. Both parents and teens are required to attend each session as family practice is imperative for the success of the programme. On occasion, though, parents did arrive without their teens and vice versa for a variety of reasons; they were permitted to attend, but this caused some difficulties in the family sessions. Substance abuse within families, both parents and teens, was prevalent and inhibited full participation.
As previously mentioned, participation was incentivised with teens receiving €5 phone credit for weekly attendance and adequate participation. Parents received Tesco shopping vouchers on weeks 7 and 14. Given the quiet, shy personalities of some teens and the dominant, outgoing ones of others, it was often difficult to discriminate between lack of participation and shyness, and so phone credit was awarded each week regardless of behaviour. The dominant behaviour of some group members proved to be both a help and a hindrance. When their interest and willingness to participate was high, they motivated and led the group to work together. These proved to be our most rewarding sessions, with full co-operation and enjoyment.

However, when the so-called leaders of the group were troublesome, their negative behaviours and attitudes permeated throughout the group. A mix of gender between teens provided challenges with hormones raging. There was regular flirting and taunting among the teens, which at times was difficult to manage. Work was undertaken in promoting respectful relationships. Most of the teens knew each other from either the local area or school. These relationships were not always positive, with outside issues often being discussed during the sessions. Given the problem of feuds and rival gangs in the Ballymun area, attention was paid to the compatibility of certain families participating in the programme. One female teen was not from the primary catchment area and did not attend the local school. Despite continuous encouragement to participate actively in the group, she declined. This rendered her quite ostracised.

As with all group work, ground rules needed to be imposed. The balance between adhering to these agreed rules and allowing the team the freedom to express themselves and have fun often proved difficult to achieve, with teens complaining that the group often felt like school. There was a heavy reliance on ice-breakers to counteract this. As discussed above, SFP is modular and workbooks are used by facilitators. To maintain fidelity, workbooks must be adhered to. Running with the momentum of the group and following the material of the workshop was not always possible. Occasionally, a particular subject matter would catch the attention of the group and spark very relevant debates. The decision was made among the facilitators to run with this momentum and cover the necessary material from the manual at a later stage.

The running of the SFP requires co-facilitation in all sessions, teen, parent and family. Where possible we aimed to have mixed gender between facilitators. As SFP was an inter-agency collaboration,
facilitators presented with a wide variety of skills, experiences and aptitudes. Coming from different agencies, facilitators also had different outlooks and goals.

While debriefing at the end of each night is built into the programme, facilitators and other staff were often tired and anxious to get home, and so a thorough debrief did not always happen. The fact that the SFP was made up of staff from many different agencies meant that people did not know each other very well and often appeared reluctant to speak openly and freely about matters that might need changing or improving. Follow-on supervision was to be provided by the facilitator’s own line manager. However, this was not always appropriate as managers were not always familiar with the SFP and issues that might arise.

The other obvious challenge associated with SFP is time. Weekly attendance at group work from 3 to 9 p.m. infringes not only on one’s work life but also on home life.

**Strengths**

The abovementioned SFP was the inaugural roll-out of the programme in the Dublin area. As this was an inter-agency collaboration it provided an excellent opportunity to liaise and network with other agencies and learn from their experience and knowledge base. Such inter-agency working created new professional relationships and enhanced existing ones. As Probation Officers, we traditionally work on an individual basis and so SFP allowed for the development of group work facilitation skills. More specifically, our co-facilitation skills were refined and our understanding of group work theory and dynamics was strengthened. To date, most of our professional experience has been in working with young offenders. YPP facilitated the teen session in SFP as this would be our area of expertise. However, the area in which the greatest amount was learned was our experience of working with the parents and non-offending teens. Some families would have had no previous involvement with the Probation Service and would have had a negative perception and attitude towards it. Our participation in the SFP helped to raise our positive profile within the community and demystify the nature of our work.

We also enhanced our knowledge of problems and issues within families that contribute to offending behaviour. Of equal importance was the learning with regard to the strengths of families and the value and benefits of empowering families.
Funding

In regard to this SFP the core budget was provided by the BLDTF. This budget covered costs of transportation, food, graduation celebrations and incentives. The physical site was given at no cost by a partner agency, the HSE. The site was a Family Centre that had the appropriate space and provided a welcoming environment. The chef worked in a local project and was paid for his services. Facilitators were released from the Network agencies as the agencies’ contribution to the programme.

Evaluation

An evaluation report for the SFP in Ballymun was provided by Dr Karol Kumpfer of Lutra Group, Salt Lake City (Kumpfer, 2008). This report was based on data gathered by the facilitators from the families using standardized evaluation instruments. These instruments are designed to assess child and parent mental health, substance abuse risk and resiliencies, family management and cohesiveness, parent and child social skills and attitudes. Data was collected from the child, parent and group facilitators to improve triangulation so as to measure real changes.

Immediately before at an orientation session and after completion of SFP at graduation, participating families completed a number of outcome instruments selected to measure the hypothesised change variables or outcomes for the family changes, child changes and parent changes.

Summary of findings

The evaluation reports that overall the family changes were most impressive for this first SFP (12–17 years) with adolescents in Ballymun. The retention of the families was impressive at 89% (eight out of nine families), which is much higher than generally expected in a first pilot group. The pre- to post-test changes were considerably greater than normally expected by the four months post-test. One possible reason for these larger than expected improvements in the family interactions and family systems dynamics was that Ballymun families that participated presented with higher levels of problems or crises than those recorded on the SFP database because of having teens who were already having behavioural problems. The Ballymun families had lower pre-test scores
for all positive family variables and had higher scores at baseline for the negative variables such as family conflict. Hence these families had more motivation and room to change and improve.

The evaluation reports that the largest changes were in the area of family dynamics. Eighty per cent or four of five family measures (all except Family Conflict reductions) were found to be statistically significant. The measures included Family Organisation, Family Cohesion, Family Communication, Family Conflict and Family Resilience. Additionally four of five family outcomes for these SFP groups were larger in effect size or amount of change than the SFP National Irish Norms. This suggests that the implementation was better than average and was a good fit for the families recruited.

Parental supervision did not improve very much, which is not typical for SFP outcomes as can be seen by the comparison norms (Kumpfer, 2008). It is a critical factor for children’s later drug and alcohol use, so improvements in this area should be worked on in the future. YPP identifies lack of parental supervision as a risk factor in young people becoming involved in anti-social behaviour and alcohol/drug misuse. We endeavour to work with families and other agencies to address this risk. The other positive parenting skill outcomes, however, bode well for the long-term effectiveness of this programme in preventing later behavioural problems and substance use in the children.

Management committee

The SFP does not stipulate that there has to be a management committee. However, to maintain the inter-agency perspective and ownership of the process – in essence to maintain community ownership of the programme – the BLDTF recommended the establishment of the committee.

This committee is made up of representatives from the stakeholder agencies in the Ballymun area. It is responsible for overseeing the implementation and future development of the programme, to provide support, advice and direction where appropriate to the site co-ordinators, ensure that the fidelity of the programme is maintained and develop appropriate policies and procedures. The committee meets at least three times over the course of the programme to review progress.
Learning

The pilot programme provided tremendous learning that has influenced how the subsequent programmes developed. The management committee has become more focused and clearer about its role; guidelines and a memorandum of understanding have been drawn up for referral agencies. Work on promoting the programme with agencies, parents and particularly engaging the teens is ongoing, and a subgroup of the management committee has formed to focus on advertising the programme in the community. Many agencies released staff to be trained in the SFP in October 2007.

However, facilitators were available from only a small number of agencies for commencement of the programme. This is an area that the management committee saw as needing to be addressed. Refresher training and a campaign to re-engage agencies in the process might be considered. The experience of running of the pilot programme highlighted the importance of supervision and support being available to the facilitators from their employers.

Ongoing support for the participating families was also recognised as important. Many of the families chose to continue meeting for support, and were facilitated to do this by the local secondary school and a member of staff from there.

Conclusion

Since this first SFP programme in Ballymun as described here, two programmes were run simultaneously in the autumn of 2008 (Tuesday and Thursday nights) and two programmes were run in spring 2009 (also Tuesday and Thursday nights).

For YPP, involvement in this very successful inter-agency skills programme has been very positive. Relationships with other agencies have been reinforced. Our profile in the community has been raised and enhanced. We have derived much learning from the experience, developing our skills in working with young people and parents, we have increased our knowledge of the importance of not seeing the young person in isolation but capitalising on the strengths and supports within the family and the community for the welfare of the young person.

Involvement in the first SFP in Ballymun has been stimulating, hard work and very worthwhile. Hearing the parents and young people
describing on graduation night how the programme had helped them as a family communicate better and have closer relationships would suggest that the SFP is a good investment.

References
