

# HELPING

# PARENTS

## A preventive approach

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### The Centre

The Parents' Help Centre is a child abuse prevention unit which began operation in Perth on 9.1.1976. The Centre is administered by the Western Australian Department for Community Welfare and is jointly funded by the Office of Child Care and Department for Community Welfare.

The Centre aims at preventing the physical abuse of pre-school children by offering a non-professional family-type support service in a warm accepting atmosphere to parents who are having difficulty in controlling their behaviour towards their (pre-school) children. The Centre is available to parents 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The Centre is located in a residential area on the fringe of the Perth City area and is readily accessible by public transport from the City. It overlooks Hyde Park and is situated on a corner site with plenty of available street parking. The Centre has been integrated into the local area with neighbours, shops and other services.

The building is an old suburban home with two self-contained flats attached, without any external signs to distinguish it from the surrounding homes. The premises are modestly but comfortably furnished with the emphasis on informality.

### Philosophy and Criteria

The Centre is based on a **secondary prevention model**, which is to say that it aims at preventing a relatively mild behaviour from becoming prolonged and severe. The Centre is not designed and therefore does not have the resources to deal with families where protection of the child is the predominant issue. Basic to the Centre is its philosophy of providing the opportunity for positive social relationships offered as extended family-type support. The focus of the Centre's service is on parent-to-parent relationships with emphasis on staff and families sharing parenting experiences free of the clinical model and expert advice giving roles. Lay staff, Parent Helpers, are the deliverers of the service, with the Centre's professional staff (a social worker and psychologist) in a supportive and supervisory role.

Another aspect of the Centre's philosophy is that it is not an investigating or reporting agency and does not therefore initiate contact with families who are unknown to it. All families are in a strict sense "self-referring" in that they initiate contact with the Centre even though it may have been suggested by other agencies or medical personnel or other forms of publicity used (particularly the poster), that such contact is made.

### Service

Parent Helpers (who are themselves parents) are the frontline of the Centre's service delivery with professional staff being responsible for the selection and training of Parent Helpers and their subsequent on-going support and supervision. Consistent with the use of Parent Helpers (P.H.'s) as service deliverers is the emphasis on offering help via parent-to-parent relationships, shared parenting experiences, acceptance and privacy. In this atmosphere, parents are able to explore with a Parent Helper alternative methods of interaction with their children and of dealing with any other difficulties facing them. The Service offered by the Centre therefore more approximated a discussion with a confidential friend or neighbour than an interview with an expert.

Thus the Centre offers a direct service to parents to help overcome the major characteristics associated with at-risk families as well as acting as a "sorting-out-place" for other difficulties.

With this perspective the Centre also acts as a facilitating and referral source.

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During crisis situations, if parents feel that this is necessary, there is accommodation for them and their children to live at the Centre over weekends (only). Although there are two self contained flats, in practice the main Unit functions as a living area and the flats as bedrooms.

### **Parent Helpers**

There are 20 Parent Helpers who are employed on a casual basis at the Centre. Each Parent Helper works a regular shift each week and they are also rostered overnight for residential weekends.

Parent Helpers were selected on the basis of being parents themselves and that they are emotionally warm, accepting and non-judgemental. These basic characteristics are overlaid with skills in the areas of problem-solving, knowledge of alternative child handling techniques and interpersonal interaction via the (on-going) staff training programme.

Typically, families telephone the Centre and then come in with their children to talk over their difficulties with a Parent Helper. On each visit the opportunity is created for a parent to privately talk with a Parent Helper. Families, when visiting the Centre, may stay as long as they wish, as they are not slotted into "appointment times". Therefore, an integral and important part of the service is the informal interaction during the preparation and taking of meals.

### **Use Of The Centre**

In slightly over three years of operation the Centre has been contacted by 741 different families where there has been a pre-school child at risk of physical injury. There have been 2926 follow-up contacts with these families.

There have been 490 "inap-

propriate" contacts by families, where the Centre has been used in its facilitating role, often where an older child is at risk. A total of 5157 contacts have been made with the Centre since its inception.

Although the first three months of operation were understandably quiet, since then the Centre has been contacted by an average of five new families per week where there is a risk of physical injury to a pre-school child.

A great deal of information about the Centre has been gathered and analysed and is presented in the "Internal Evaluation of the Parents' Help Centre" (available through the Department for Community Welfare Library, 81 St George's Terrace, Perth, 6000). Much of this information has been used for management purposes i.e. matching the Centre's resources to the target population needs. Other information such as family profiles and characteristics (using the Centre) are also included in the report.

Although it is difficult to evaluate a preventive scheme, the number of families using the Centre and the feedback obtained from them, indicates that the Centre is achieving what it set out to achieve.

### **Publicity**

Considerable thought has been given to the issue of publicity even before the Centre became operational. There is an inherent conflict in publicising the Centre. Firstly, it is essential that other organisations and the community are aware of the Centre and its services so that it will be used appropriately. Secondly, however, if the Centre is widely known as dealing with abusing parents, it could become stigmatised and therefore unattractive to the target population. Overall, publicity for the Centre has been on various fronts with the underlying emphasis on a low-key approach, at a controlled rate and consistent over time. By far the most effective form

of publicity has been the Centre's poster which has been extensively distributed.

### **Overview**

Various schemes have been proposed for dealing with child abuse. There are, however, two major common elements running through these schemes which effect the model adopted and the service offered.

The first continuum is the target population of the project. This can be categorised as the at-risk factor, ranging from the proposition that all parents need to improve their parenting skills, through to chronic-at-risk situations where immediate protection of the child is necessary. The defining of the target population then determines the conceptual method of intervention which is most appropriate and has been defined as primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. Within this framework one trend is clear and that is that low-risk situations tend to focus services on the parents, whereas high risk situations focus more on the child.

The other continuum is that of the model, from the intensive, clinical, professional intervention through to the informal, non-professional approach.

This article has attempted to present the model of the Centre and its target population and service. Through its criteria and philosophy, the Centre defines to its target population and to other agencies, its services, their integration into the existing family welfare network and the assurance that the services are complementary rather than in competition with existing agency services.

Through the first two years of its pilot period and to the present time, the Parents' Help Centre has demonstrated that as an innovative programme it is able to offer a valuable service to parents who feel that they may physically injure their pre-school child.