

Copelen Street Family Centre of the Uniting Church

(Formerly Methodist Babies' Home)

The Copelen Street Family Centre was set up in March 1974 as an experimental outreach programme. It was to look at a variety of methods for serving families in their own homes. The programme had two aims; to promote family life and prevent family break-down. It was designed for families with pre-school children, so was aimed at early prevention or intervention and the target population was to be broad, reaching out to families across a wide socio-economic spectrum, but particularly to those extremely disadvantaged families where children were at risk and where there were multiple problems.

The Centre was planned with a social welfare orientation, with a social worker as the Programme Director and was based on the theoretical framework of child welfare, with the emphasis on the family as a unit. The welfare aspects were to be given support by the close involvement of a community health nurse and a kindergarten directress, mother-craft nurses, child care workers, an activities officer and an occupational therapist as well as various lay people and volunteers were also to be involved in the programme. It was to provide a specialist service on a continuum between local developmental services at one end of the scale, and the placement services of the Child Care Service of the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches at the other.

The programme was based on a move by a previously State wide, Melbourne based agency (Methodist Babies' Home) to enter into a local neighbourhood area and to build up legitimacy and inter agency links in quite a new way. The professional child welfare programme was to become an integral part of the neighbourhood services. The agency's accessibility would mean earlier detection of troubled families. It was felt that the child who is not taken away from his roots depends less on the professional and more on his family peers and other significant persons for his healing. Also the knowledge of placement strategies, child welfare provisions etc. could become available to local personnel who knew of the problems but who did not have the background knowledge or the resources to intervene. If it finally became clear that parents could not meet the needs of their children within their own homes, at least other forms of intervention would have to be attempted in a

consistent way instead of the often sporadic discontinuous manner of fragmented services which had often worked in a way tangential to the main problems.

Copelen Street as it has evolved, has provided the following range of services:

1. Supportive and Advocacy Services.

These are often most important in gaining trust and may be the basis of service throughout the family contact. They could be directed at a number of families' situational problems. They must also be based on a developed knowledge and expertise on how other agencies in the community function and must be established on good working relationships with key staff members in those agencies. These services include income assistance, housing assistance, health and well being assistance, legal assistance, transportation, child care, transporting and waiting with clients at court or hospital, home making, emergency funds.

2. Treatment Services for Adults.

Individual counselling, i.e. one to one interactions aimed at improving social behaviour or situation of the child or family. Support and advocacy services to the family are often being used as a back-up to individual counselling. Parent aide or home-maker counselling or education, child management or parent education and crisis intervention, i.e. special after hours contact. The Centre also provides socialization or recreation groups with home-maker components.

3. Treatment Services for Children.

Therapeutic day care, i.e. individualized treatment or planning for children in small groups, plus kindergarten day care. Short term emergency fostering or weekend fostering with a Centre staff member for the purpose of parent relief, yet providing a warm and re-enforcing environment for the child rather than a rejection. Individual therapy e.g. behaviour modification programme, speech therapy, remedial teaching carried out at the Centre through the help and supervision of outside consultants.

4. Client Participation.

Attempted at all levels of programme (except for board membership), but by no means at present developed at maximum level. The families however, have been deeply involved in the development of the programme and have become increasingly verbal in expressing their needs and opinions to Centre's staff.

Copelen Street has tried to provide a high standard of developmental child care designed to facilitate individualisation rather than regimentation. The aim is actualization of every child's developmental potential in interaction with truly caring adults to respect them, hold out standards for their development and stimulate self respect and aspirations in the child as well as in his parents.

In the three and a half years of its operation no family at Copelen Street has come into long term care, nor have there been episodes of recurring physical abuse, nor has any child had to be admitted to hospital because of neglect or failure to thrive, though some families have been referred for these reasons.

Problems related to acceptance and bonding have been confronted and often worked through. The developmental child care is carried out alongside efforts at outreach to obtain adult involvement and respon-

sibility for their own child. It is this combination of approaches which is seen as one of the most important lessons to be learned from the programme.

Finally the Centre has been in an ideal position because of its central position on a continuum between local developmental networks and the specialized child placement services to recognize through colleague interaction the similarities and differences in various areas of the work, and has tried to move toward a philosophy of family and child welfare that could be consistent at all levels. This enriching integration and freedom to challenge and confront has allowed a true development of new approaches to families and has been supported by the resources to carry them through.

HELEN THOMAS
PROGRAMME DIRECTOR — 1974-77.

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NOTE: The Copelen Street Family Centre programme has been evaluated under a Commonwealth Child Care Research Grant. The resulting publication "Copelen Street Family Centre — A Descriptive & Evaluative Report" is available from the Centre, cost \$5.00.



"To promote family life and prevent family breakdown."