Too Much Too Soon? Balancing Relationship-building with the Gathering of Meaningful Data

Maree Stanley¹, Lorna Berry²

¹Research & Evaluation Officer, Playgroup Queensland.
²QLD/NT Manager, Sing&Grow Australia.

Correspondence for this article should be directed to Dr Maree Stanley, Playgroup Queensland at Email: mstanley@playgroupqld.com.au or Mailing Address: 86 Orchid St Enoggera, QLD 4051. (07) 3855 9600

Abstract

Early intervention services participate in community events to engage local families and contribute to community development. Measuring the success of these events is challenging, not least because it is often difficult to collect data from families prior to developing relationships and trust. Semi-structured interviews with Communities for Children Facilitating Partners were conducted to examine practice by services other than Sing&Grow. Questions included: What are the challenges to collecting meaningful data? What methods do services use to measure engagement? This paper considers how the findings from this research can be used to inform the development of tools and processes to promote and measure family engagement at community events.

Keywords: Community events, Evaluation, Families with young children, Music therapy.
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Introduction

A key determinant in the effectiveness of social intervention services is the extent to which services successfully reach and engage with families who are most in need of support (Cortis, Katz, & Patulny, 2009). Programs that can reach out to highly vulnerable families, particularly those who do not typically engage with services easily, are also highly prioritised by funders (Williams, Teggelove, & Day, 2014). Central to family engagement, with the intention of providing positive therapeutic services, is rapport building (Izralson, 2011). When service providers establish good working relationships with parents, they are more likely to listen to what the professionals have to say and make better use of professional services (Moore, 2007).

One way of engaging families who are not connected with support services is through community events, an activity that for many charities is likely an ‘assumed activity’ (Ruperto & Kerr, 2009, p. 307). Such events can expose people to new ideas and experiences (Ruperto & Kerr, 2009). Sing&Grow, a national music therapy program for families with young children, regularly participates in community events for the purpose of family engagement. Participation typically involves setting up a stall and providing information and activities for children and their caregivers.

This article explores the juxtaposition between the need to collect data at events to demonstrate the engagement of vulnerable families with the need to build rapport and
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engagement into services. To examine this issue, we conducted six interviews with staff of Communities for Children Facilitating Partner organisations. The aim of this research was to understand their perceptions regarding the collection of data and engaging the community. We were also interested in the methods used in their regions and any challenges that were experienced.

The Research Context

Communities for Children (CfC) is an initiative of the Australian Department of Social Services (DSS) focused on supporting children and families in 52 disadvantaged communities across Australia. In each location a Facilitating Partner (FP) is funded to take an early intervention approach that supports families to improve the way they relate to each other; improve parenting skills; and to ensure the health and well-being of children. While the term ‘early intervention’ is often associated with developmental support for children with a medical diagnosis, it is an approach that can support long-term outcomes for families experiencing the determinants of disadvantage.

The internationally recognised 1,000 Days movement identifies the period from conception through to a child’s second birthday as an ideal time in which to shape a healthier future for that child (First 1000 Days Australia, n.d.). In particular, the parental characteristic of responsiveness has been identified as having a positive impact on child development including the areas of language and social skills (Guttentag et al., 2014;
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Landry, Smith, Miller-Loncar, & Swank, 1997; Landry, Smith, Swank, & Guttentag, 2008; Landry et al., 2017; Wade, Jenkins, Venkadasalam, Binnoon-Erez, & Ganea, 2018), behaviour (Guttentag et al., 2014; Landry et al., 2017; Van Zeijl et al., 2006), and brain growth (Luby et al., 2012). Early intervention in the context of this paper, refers to the age of children our program is working with, 0-5 years, as well as the stage of family involvement.

Building upon local strengths to meet community need, CfC FPs create capability within local service systems by promoting evidence-based practice. They collaborate with other organisations, and provide funding to Community Partners (CP), to provide a holistic service system (Australian Government Department of Social Services, n.d.). To aid in the systematic collection of data, the Australian Government developed the Data Exchange system, developed and maintained by DSS. A key goal of the Data Exchange system is to enable service providers to work together to achieve community outcomes. Programs receiving DSS funding directly or via a CfC FP collect data from clients including demographic information such as sex, age, Indigenous status and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background. Programs are required to collect and input this information into the Data Exchange, where possible.

Clients who access these services are not obligated to provide information, should they be unwilling to participate. Each consenting client who provides information including name and date of birth is assigned a unique and unidentified statistical linkage key within the Data Exchange. This ensures client privacy while enabling DSS to monitor which services the client has or is attending within the community, providing a holistic view of
service use. If a client attends a service without consenting to have their demographic information recorded, the client may be recorded as attending but will be listed under a pseudonym or as an ‘unidentified client’, and information about this client within the system will be minimal.

In addition, service providers who are directly or indirectly funded through DSS are also invited to be involved in the ‘Partnership Approach’ on a voluntary basis. The Partnership Approach includes the collection of extended demographics and outcomes reporting. A benefit of participating in the Partnership Approach is the ability for service providers to extract reports to better understand the needs of the community and the impact of the interventions.

In short, programs such as Sing&Grow receive DSS funding directly and via CfC FPs are asked to collect identifiable data from clients who attended the services, including one-off community events. DSS encourages the collection of identified data at community events to measure whether the events have engaged vulnerable families and subsequently led to these clients attending other social services available within the community.

At the time of writing, Sing&Grow is contracted as a CfC Community Partner in seven locations around Australia, providing services targeted to meet community need as identified by a local committee. Sing&Grow is an evidence-based, early intervention music therapy program, aiming to reduce the impact of early adversity across Australia (Nicholson, Berthelsen, Abad, Williams, & Bradley, 2008). The program promotes the ecological determinants of well-being by encouraging caregiver-child interactions, building
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caregiver confidence and knowledge, and enhancing social connectedness by connecting caregivers and children with other families and community services. Sing&Grow is targeted at families at risk of, or experiencing, disadvantage with children aged 0-5 years. The program is delivered by Registered Music Therapists.

Music therapy is a research-based practice and profession in which music is used to actively support people as they strive to improve their health, functioning and well-being. It is the intentional use of music by a university-trained professional who, in Australia, is registered with the Australian Music Therapy Association (AMTA) Inc. Music therapists incorporate a range of music making methods within and through a therapeutic relationship. They are employed in a variety of sectors including health, community, aged care, disability, early childhood, and private practice. Music therapy is different from music education and entertainment as it focuses on health, functioning and well-being (AMTA, n.d.). International interest and focus on music therapy with families is increasing and, in particular, the role of music in parent-child attachment (Teggelove, 2017).

Family engagement is defined as “… facilitating involvement in services (in other words the ‘front end’ of service provision: referral pathways, information and access to the service)” (Cortis et al., 2009, p. 3). Community events are one way of engaging with families who may be ‘hard-to-reach’ or who, conversely, may find services ‘hard-to-access’. Rather than defining families as hard-to-reach when they choose not to engage with services or are highly wary of becoming involved, it may be appropriate to define services as ‘unreachable’ (Evangelou, Coxon, Sylva, Smith, & Chan, 2013, p.128; Webster-Stratton 1998). Similarly, McDonald (2010) posited that the term hard-to-reach is
‘problematic’ because it may give the impression that those families are recalcitrant and doesn’t address the idea that services themselves may be difficult to access (2010, pp. 1-2). We agree that it is more useful to focus on the barriers that challenge or prevent families from accessing services by developing and offering programs and services that are more ‘reachable’ and align with the needs of families (see Boag-Munro & Evangelou, 2012).

There is a distinct lack of literature regarding early engagement and collection of data at community events. However, the high level of service participation in such events suggests this is regarded as an important early step in developing a relationship. Research conducted by the National Evaluation Consortium (Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, and the Australian Institute of Family Studies) demonstrated the role of ‘soft entry’ activities in ‘reaching parents who had not previously accessed community services’ (Cortis et al., 2009, p.35). At the same time, it was revealed that collecting data from families at such events is not readily undertaken, with one research participant identifying that asking families to provide information at early engagement could be detrimental to engagement:

… we don’t want to scare people off with checklists of: Are you this background? Are you that background? What are you circumstances? (Research participant, Cortis et al., 2009, p. 35).

A three-year evaluation of Room to Play, a drop-in program based in the United Kingdom designed to engage families with young children, found that weekly attendance dropped by half during the week chosen to collect data from participants (Evangelou et al.,
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2013). At the time it was unclear whether this was due to the timing of the survey (summer break) or whether families had chosen to stay away on the week that data was to be collected. However, when the survey was repeated the following year, in 2008, a similar impact on attendance was observed. This adds weight to the argument that one of the reasons that parents were attending the drop-in with their children was that it was an ‘anonymous’ program (Evangelou et al., 2013, p. 137).

We were interested in examining these issues in greater detail. The need for further research regarding the collection of meaningful data to inform service delivery for vulnerable families has been identified by researchers at the Australian Institute of Family Studies (Hand, 2017). Anecdotally, through the delivery of our own programs and speaking with our colleagues within the sector, we heard that services were finding the collection of identified data from families at community events challenging, with many visitors declining to provide identifying information. There are two issues associated with this, in relation to the delivery of the Sing&Grow program and accountability:

It makes it difficult to assess the success of the community engagement. Without knowing who attended the community event it is not possible to link attendance at the event to subsequent attendances at either Sing&Grow or other services offered within the community.

The second issue was related to our hypothesis that asking families, ‘too much too soon’ is harmful to engagement. Is the mere act of asking vulnerable families to disclose
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information too early (at community events) detrimental to the goal of developing rapport and encouraging families to seek assistance through our program or other social services?

While demographic data is generally considered to be non-sensitive information, this perception can vary. Families who have had negative experiences with government or organisations acting on behalf of the government (child protection services for example), may not feel comfortable sharing information. Adults with poor literacy skills or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD) may not be willing to share their information, due to literacy barriers or general unease in providing persons unknown to them with personal information.

Methods

Approval to undertake the research was provided by the Australian Department of Social Services (DSS) as the government funding agency of the Communities for Children initiative. The project received ethical approval from the University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (#2017001472). This research project had several aims:

1. Investigate the perceptions of social service providers regarding the collection of demographic data during community events;
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2. Better understand the difficulties and/or barriers of collecting information from families attending one-off community events; and

3. Understand the ways in which CfC Facilitating Partners report their Community Partners are meeting these challenges.

We contacted each of the seven CfC Facilitating Partners that Sing&Grow is currently working with, inviting them to participate in semi-structured interviews. Six individuals agreed to participate in phone interviews. Participants were located in three of the eight Australian states and territories. We used a small selected sample of Facilitating Partners that was not intended to be representative. A large-scale survey was outside of the scope of this research project. With the permission of participants, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Semi-structured interviews with Facilitating Partner staff were thematically analysed using NVivo. We were primarily interested in understanding challenges associated with data collection and measuring the impact of community events.

In conducting the thematic analysis we referred to guidelines published by Joffe (2012). An early step in our process was the development of codes in NVivo (QSR International). Codes were developed inductively by repeated reading (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of each transcript and deductively through our practice knowledge. Both authors then coded the same interview transcripts, meeting to discuss differences and redevelop the code book where necessary. Doing this enabled us to develop themes starting with those that were ‘high frequency’ before going onto explore those that were ‘idiosyncratic’ (Joffe, 2012, p. 217).

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Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question …” (2006, p. 82). Due to the small sample size we were not able to make any generalisations. Rather our research enabled us to examine experiences and strategies for engaging with families who may find services hard-to-access and the ways in which success was defined and measured in relation to community events. The themes were chosen by reason of association (importance) to the research question in addition to reviewing the words and phrases that reoccurred within the data. We were interested in shared knowledge and strategies as well as discrete experiences in relation to the key research question.

Participants were aware that de-identified analysis collected from the interview would be shared with DSS, CfC Facilitating Partners and Community Partners in the form of publication, presentation or other. Care was taken to ensure de-identification of interview material prior to analysis - this may mean for example, that the location of the service was removed from discussion. Where direct quotes are included in publication, we have the express permission of the individual to do so. This ensured that the quotation was not used out of context and provided an extra check and balance for de-identification, i.e. was the interviewee confident that they could not be identified from the quote used.
Findings and Discussion

Defining Successful Engagement

We received a range of responses when we asked interviewees to comment on how they defined ‘successful engagement,’ including ongoing and consistent relationships with services, relationships of trust and mutual respect, recommending the service to other families within the community, and families feeling comfortable with services. It should be noted that these responses were not necessarily limited to community events but more broadly described family engagement. The quote below illustrates the importance the interviewee placed on consistency and relationship between service provider and family:

… I think it can look like many things, depending on the dynamics of the client. For example, families could be attending consistently. You know, that’s engagement. Or families and the program coordinator having a respectful, reciprocal relationship (Interviewee 6).

Attending the service was also viewed by some as engagement, although it was noted that there is a difference between simply turning up and being “actively engaged” and participating (Interviewee 4). Conversely, however, it was noted that some families may find services hard to access, so any engagement can be viewed as a success (Interviewee 1). Here the interviewee also made a point of talking about “multiple points of contact”, indicating that success can also be viewed as the capacity for a family to feel comfortable.
within their community and access services that meet their needs; “successful engagement to me is families that have lots of contact at different touch points” (Interviewee 1).

Two interviewees touched on the role of service participation in community events in the early engagement of families, stating that engagement of a family could be defined as successful if the family followed up with an action following the event. “Successful engagement to me would be coming, listening to the information and then following up afterwards” (Interviewee 5). Another noted that while service providers were unlikely to get families signing up on the day, community events were a useful strategy to enable families to become familiar with services (Interviewee 1).

In addition to the opportunity for engaging families, there was also the perception that attending community events enables networking between services (which presumably leads to an increase in warm referrals between services and hopefully provides families with holistic service provision to meet their needs) (Interviewee 1).

One interviewee took care to explain that for community events to be effective, there needs to be a clearly communicated message to service providers about the purpose of the event, lest it turns into just an opportunity for socialising between service providers in a community:

I’m sure yourselves, you’ve both gone through events at times when you just sort of stood around and there’s been no real reason for being there other than a social event... Whereas if you’re really clear during that two-hour event that this is the purpose, and this is our message, that carries a lot more weight (Interviewee 5).
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The need for a clear purpose underpinning the event is recognised in the literature and it is recommended to communicate this purpose to all stakeholders, including community members. A clear purpose also enables the development of appropriate evaluation measures (Ruperto & Kerr, 2009).

Challenges to Data Collection

We did not find strong evidence to support our initial hypothesis that collecting data from families at community events impacted negatively on the development of rapport and subsequent engagement into intervention or other services within the community. It should be noted, however, that many interviewees did not report collecting identified data at events. Rather, they talked about the collection of non-identifiable demographic information. One interviewee reflecting on their community noted that it was difficult to collect personal information because some families were suspicious of services from their family’s past interactions:

Demographic data, no. I don’t think it restricts that therapeutic relationship or the rapport building, but I do think sometimes names and addresses can. And, more from not because of what we would do as a service, but what may have been done in the past (Interviewee 5).
Another interviewee did reflect that some families were wary of providing information, likening it to the experiences of being asked to provide personal information while shopping:

… the people on the program felt, when I was asking people for information, when you've just met someone and they're like, oh, can you tell me where you live, it can be quite confronting for families and they don’t want to provide that information straight away. And I'm the same, even like people when they ask your postcode at the shopping market: Well, what do you want that for? (Interviewee 2).

In addition to the perception that some families were wary of having their information collected, an interviewee noted that families were weary by the need to provide information and fill in forms:

Whatever service they’re involved in, it’s probably like a ten-page, you know, intake form that they’ve filled out, and have done that numerous times. So I think, after a while, families just get really tired of it, and, you know, really sick of it (Interviewee 4).

It was also noted that services found collecting data challenging at times. These challenges were mostly linked to staff capacity: One interviewee, who was speaking about an intervention service that had a very short duration, felt that data collection took time away from providing the service (Interviewee 2).
Other interviewees commented on the specific set of skills required to collect data, with the idea that the sector needed to work closely with specialists, like universities to improve ‘academic rigour’ (Interviewee 1). Others spoke of the need to ensure that the collection of data was ‘meaningful’:

… you just have to remember why we’re actually collecting it, you know, and asking those specific questions that you’re actually going to use in the future. Otherwise, it’s just a waste of everybody’s time’ (Interviewee 4).

Confidence of workers was also raised as an issue, with one interviewee perceiving that more confidence and greater understanding of why the data was required would improve data collection:

Yes, if you’re feeling confident, and I feel like you have a calm, sort of assertive approach, that will help break some of those insecurities. But if you’ve got those insecurities, you’re probably going to, you know, not do as well collecting that data. You might be a little bit avoiding … Well, I know some people just plain avoid asking or collecting that data (Interviewee 6).

The impact of rapport and an existing relationship was also deemed significant, with acknowledgement that an existing relationship had a positive impact on the capacity to collect information from families:

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I think it goes back to the person’s confidence, how they approach people. Also, the Community Partners have pretty good relationships with a lot of the families here. So those that they know, that attend, I think that would be easy for them to collect that data, if they don’t have it already (Interviewee 6).

The necessity of trust in successful relationships emerged as a common theme across nearly all interviews. While community events could contribute to the development of trust between families and services, other factors including time, word-of-mouth and positive (or absence of negative) experiences in the past were all considered important:

But it really does all come back to relationship. It comes back to that rapport that you have managed to build. So the rapport could be from your community events, from your word of mouth, if other people know what you do and then they choose to come in for their specific reason and you’ve engaged them that way (Interviewee 5).

Similarly, Evangelou et al. (2013) reported that staff of the service “felt strongly that the best way of finding out more information about the users was to try to build a strong relationship with them” (p. 130). Further to this it was felt that families may be “more likely to return to RTP [Room to Play] and be willing to share more information about themselves on future visits” (Evangelou, 2013, p. 130).
Methods Used to Collect Data at Community Events

Interviewees described a variety of methods used to collect information and feedback from families at community events. One interviewee mentioned using a registration desk but cautioned that this was not an exact way to measure attendance, as one adult may sign in for multiple group members. Several interviewees mentioned the use of giveaways, counting the number of sausages, goodie bags etc, at the end of the day and subtracting this from the total available at the start. While this is also not an exact method, (not all attendees for example will accept a giveaway), it does provide some evidence of the numbers of people attending and can provide information on whether the event is growing in popularity from year to year.

Services who were wishing to collect identified data spoke of providing families with “passports”. This also encouraged families to visit various services around the event, providing the impetus to visit stalls and speak to new services. Families may collect stamps from each service and then enter their details at the end of the event for the opportunity to go into the draw for a prize. Services provide information on the passport, so that families are aware that their data is being collected for reporting purposes. Other means were the use of “roving reporters” who moved around events inviting families to participate in the collection of feedback and data. One interviewee noted that the effectiveness of this approach could be improved by asking trusted members of the community to act as the “reporter”. However, while people may feel more comfortable sharing with someone that
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you know and trust, the information may be skewed because it may be more likely that the person will say nice things about the event (Interviewee 3).

**Implications for Practice**

Our interviews indicated that services are using a variety of methods to collect feedback and data from families attending events. Many of these methods are useful for determining community interest in the event (for example, counting attendance) but may be less useful in assessing whether the event successfully encouraged families to access local social services. The exception to this was the use of passports, with the consent of families, information collected via the passport could contribute to knowledge of broader service use. This information could be used to evaluate the success of the event in terms of service engagement and contribute to measuring collective impact via the DSS Data Exchange. If passports are used, care must be taken to ensure all families are aware that the passport is being used to collect this information. Families must be provided with information regarding the use of data in order to provide informed consent.

In addition to the viability of using passports as a tool for collecting data, passports are also thought to be beneficial to family engagement, providing an incentive for families to visit various stalls at the event. Children are encouraged by the collection of an individualised stall stamp or sticker on the card. When leaving the event, adult caregivers can choose to remove the cover of the passport to go into the prize draw.
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Rather than inhibiting relationship development, our research indicates that the passport can provide the impetus for visiting multiple services at the event. By providing incentive to connect with services, the passport enables opportunity for rapport building which, is considered an essential step to family engagement (Izralson, 2011).

One of the permeating themes was the priority for building relationships with staff and services based on trust, and this was acknowledged to take time. There was also appreciation for the value of data, but not at the expense of engagement with families. The sharing and recognition of challenges in balancing rapport building and data collection can be validating for those working in the field. It was also noted during the interviews that community events provide local services with the opportunity to get to know each other. Further research is needed to examine and or develop a means of measuring the impact of these events for the services themselves.

**Future Research - Next Steps**

The results from this study will be shared with participating Facilitating Partners, who can in turn share this with their Community Partners. The results will also be shared with the Australian Department of Social Services, as the funding body to advocate for further research regarding different ways of measuring the success of community events.

Building upon the ideas that have been shared for balancing the measurement of engagement and the building of rapport, Sing&Grow will be trialling a feedback tool using a soft outcomes measurement approach. Families will have the opportunity to give

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feedback about their experience of Sing&Grow at community events by placing a sticker on an evaluation poster. This will provide staff with feedback on the event, as well as attendance numbers. In order to measure whether families who have attended the event subsequently attend a Sing&Grow session, music therapists will ask families who attend Sing&Grow programs in CfC sites whether they attended the event.

A possible next step will be to use the themes identified within these interviews to develop a survey tool to determine if findings from this research are representative of all social services involved in community events. Subsequent research questions may include: To what extent does service participation in community engagement lead to family engagement? What can make participation by this service more effective in the goal of family engagement?

Participation by services in community events was perceived to be an important aspect of service collaboration, increasing opportunities for warm referrals and community connectiveness. As noted during one of the interviews, this warrants further examination. Organisations may wish to consider how they might measure the effectiveness of events in terms of improving collaboration and integrated service delivery for families.

**Conclusion**

A key aim of hosting community events within CfC locations is to encourage families, particularly those who may be at risk of disadvantage, to access local community services. Subsequent engagement of families into services is also considered an important measure.
of success. In other words, the success of community events cannot be measured by attendance alone. Organisations require support to choose methods of data collection which have the least impact on the building of rapport.

This article examined the challenges of collecting information from families at community events. While families are not obligated to provide their information, services are encouraged to collect information to contribute to the DSS Data Exchange where possible. Facilitating Partners have shared their perspectives on the different purposes for community events, challenges and methods of collecting data. From the interviewees, we learned that using passports were an effective way to collect information and a tool for increasing engagement during the event. It is hoped that sharing these findings will help to inform the planning of future engagement events and aid the collection of information to measure outcomes. The quality of data reported by Community Partners would be enhanced by clearly articulating the purpose of events and developing tools to measure family engagement.
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