CHAPTER 4

Building Strengths in Families and Communities

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the experiences of one community-based agency, Te Aroha Noa, which has developed effective strategies for enhancing family and community well-being. The agency’s name is derived from te reo Māori (the indigenous language of New Zealand) and embraces the idea of unconditional love and care. Te Aroha Noa provides early childhood services alongside a range of other services and has developed innovative approaches for nurturing the strengths of families. It has also contributed to building the capacity of the community within which it is situated. For over two decades, the agency has worked intentionally to understand the diverse needs of the families that come to Te Aroha Noa and has developed creative strategies for responding to these needs. Strengths-based and community-development perspectives inform the work and focus attention upon positive change strategies that enhance family and child well-being. This chapter presents the agency’s experiences in developing an approach to practice that spans early childhood, family and community work, and adult education. It explores the key concepts that are central to this practice. The chapter draws on examples from the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) center, which is located on the main site of the agency, and the parenting support and education programs provided to families that are delivered on-site and in-home.
Te Aroha Noa has provided services to people in Palmerston North (a provincial city of 80,000 people in the North Island of New Zealand) for over 20 years. It was established in the late 1980s when the Central Baptist Church made a decision to transfer its concern for people into action. It began with a counseling service located within the community so that the service was easily accessible to families. As time passed other services were added, including a play group that grew into a fully licensed ECEC center, parenting programs, adult education programs, an outreach social work and family support service, community development programs, and, more recently, programs for teenagers and for teen parents. Currently over 60 staff are employed across the agency’s services and over 150 volunteers support the organization. The ECEC center has between 80 and 90 children on its roll; at any point in time over 200 families and individuals are receiving support from the agency. While many live in the immediate vicinity, those living in other parts of the city also utilize the agency’s services.

The integrated service model has enabled families to address their immediate issues but also to seek out further opportunities for development and growth. The blending of individual and community development work and the focus on life-long learning creates the potential for change within families. This approach brings other, more general, benefits and has seen an increase in the confidence of local residents to engage with wider social and political institutions and with accessing other community resources and opportunities. Working with diversity is a key focus of practice. This includes understanding cultural frameworks and the range of life experiences of families (Munford & Sanders, 2008; Munford & Walsh-Tapiata, 2005). All of the agency’s services, including the early childhood services and the parenting education and support programs, are based on a commitment to building collaborative partnerships with families and with the wider community. The location of these services within the neighborhood provides an anchor of support for families (Duncan, 2008) and engenders a sense of belonging where, in their interactions with families, staff in all of the agency’s services demonstrate respect for the family’s values and beliefs (May & Mitchell, 2009). The agency has been available and accessible to families and has been prepared to adapt its approaches to more effectively respond to the needs of families.

The remainder of the chapter outlines the key theoretical ideas that have informed practice at Te Aroha Noa and identifies a number of key concepts that are at the essence of this agency’s work with