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“Arranged Friendships”

The Final Report on the Brotherhood of St Laurence

“Family Friends” Pilot program

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1. Introduction

This is the final report in a two part evaluation of the Family Friends Program. The Interim Evaluation was completed in April 1996. "Family Friends" was a pilot program of the Brotherhood of St Laurence which grew out of an earlier program on homelessness among young women. Family Friends was designed to assist vulnerable young women who were in the transition to motherhood. The objectives of the program were to provide young women with a friendship with a volunteer woman that would last at least 5 years, and information about appropriate expectations of children and general "mother lore" in a supportive group setting. The goal of the one-to-one relationship was to facilitate "normal friendship" in which the focus of the friendship was on meeting the need of the young woman for a friend, not on the volunteer being a parent educator. It was envisaged that each young woman would also be linked with a community worker who would be available to provide individualised assistance and counselling as required.

Information about the program was disseminated to service providers and young women who might be interested in such a program through obstetric hospitals, maternal and child health services and specialist housing and counselling services for young women. Information about the program was initially made available to volunteers who had completed the Big Brother/Big Sister training program and later in newspaper advertisements and notices in places such as public libraries. Prospective volunteers and young women interested in the program were asked to contact the program co-ordinator who provided further information to help them decide whether to join the program.

Volunteers were asked to attend a series of group sessions aimed at preparing them for the program through exploring motivation and a range of issues which might arise in the developing friendships. Young woman who were interested in the program were asked to come along to joint group sessions with the volunteers in which they could get to know one another. The co-ordinator sought the views of both volunteers and the young women about the person with whom they thought they might be able to establish a positive relationship and "matching" into dyads was done on this basis. The co-ordinator maintained regular contact with participants on an individual basis as well as providing periodic group meetings which had an educational and social focus.

The pilot program consisted of three cohorts of volunteers and young women. It was anticipated that each of these groups would be comprised of five young women and five volunteers so that there would be a total of 15 dyads in the program overall. Considerable

delays were encountered in the establishment of the program as scheduled and it proved to be far more difficult to recruit young women than was expected. The program criteria were changed somewhat as a result - for example, extending the age criteria to include women up to their mid twenties, broadening the eligibility criteria to include young women who already had babies as well as those who were pregnant, and removing the requirement that the participants live in the inner urban area.

Despite these adjustments, the anticipated numbers were still not achieved. In the first cohort three dyads were formed, in the second cohort four dyads were formed, and in the third cohort five dyads were formed. While all twelve of the volunteers were interviewed, it was only possible to contact and interview six of the young women, with those who withdrew from the program at a very early stage leaving no forwarding address. Consequently, the evaluation inevitably gives a greater insight into the experiences of the volunteers than those of the young women in the program, and it provides a greater understanding of those young women who remained in the program than those who withdrew.

A semi-longitudinal design which described the evolution of the program and traced the development of the friendships was chosen as the most appropriate model of evaluating a small scale, innovative program. A control group was not used because of the practical problems involved in finding such a matched control group, and because the small numbers in the pilot program would make it difficult to determine the significance of any differences between an experimental and control group. The rationale for a semi-longitudinal design was twofold. Firstly, the objectives of the project are themselves medium to longterm (for example, the envisaged duration of the friendships was 5 years). Secondly, to provide a "thick description" of the evolution of the project and the problems it encountered.

The interim report was based on the first two cohorts in the program, and this final report examines the outcome of all three cohorts. Interviews with both the volunteers and the young women were held at regular intervals after the formation of the relationship. This meant that the first cohort was followed up for the longest period. Interviews with the dyads in the first cohort were conducted at approximately 4 months, 8 months, and 24 months. None of the dyads formed in the second cohort were still intact by the time of the first follow-up interview, while for the third cohort, there were only two follow-up interviews possible within the evaluation time period. Participants were interviewed at a place of their choice, usually their home or workplace, and in accord with the Brotherhood of St Laurence policy, were paid a small honorarium for their time. The final follow-up interviews were done by telephone.

In addition to interviewing the participants, there were regular interviews conducted with the two part-time program leaders over the life of the program. In the first 14 months of the program, there were 12 meetings held with program staff, and there was one follow-up interview well after the completion of the program. The interviews during the implementation phase concentrated on the program's development and adjustments which were being made in the face of unanticipated obstacles. The follow-up interview explored the program leaders' reflections on the program as a whole.

The evaluation design was worked out in consultation with Brotherhood of St Laurence senior management, the Family Friends program staff and with the participants in the first cohort whose feedback on a draft of the questionnaire was sought. Participants were also given copies of the Interim Evaluation and some attended a feedback session on that report. Because of the ethical issues associated with such research (for example, intrusiveness and confidentiality), the written informed consent of the participants was obtained soon after they entered the program. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the evaluation at any time and that participation in the program was not dependent upon being part of the evaluation. The importance of evaluating a new program was explained and participants agreed that if they withdrew from the program they could still be approached for the purposes of evaluation. The researcher was introduced to most of the young women and the volunteers at each cohort's lunch held a few months after the friendship had commenced.

One of the major problems in the evaluation was the very high mobility of the group of young women the program was designed to serve, making it extremely difficult to locate and follow them up for interviews if they were no longer in contact with their volunteer or the person who referred them to the program. The reasons for such high mobility are diverse and may include the difficulty of obtaining secure, affordable housing, the emotional turmoil surrounding the birth and the changes occurring in relationships with the baby's father and family.

Another major challenge in evaluating such a program were the possible iatrogenic risks associated with placing embryonic relationships under the microscope of an evaluation, with the possible impact of making the "arranged friendship" (to use the phrase coined by one volunteer) in its formative phases even more unnatural.

There were also challenges involved in how to write up the evaluation as in such a small sample, it is inevitable that people involved in the program will recognise one another, particularly in a program in which the numbers were so small. The Interim Evaluation gave very detailed verbatim quotes of participants and while such qualitative data provided rich

insights into the participants' experiences, some concern was expressed about its potential identifiability. The Final Report has therefore been written in a different style.

2. Literature Review

Despite the renewed interest in the role of volunteers in areas as diverse as honorary probation officers to nursing terminally ill AIDS patients, there is relatively little in the research literature on volunteers - who they are, what they are seeking, the positive and negative impact of being a volunteer and how services which seek to draw upon their resources satisfy them or alienate them. The evaluation of "Family Friends" was thus designed to explore the experiences of the volunteers as well as the young women.

In contrast, there is an enormous body of research on young, single mothers - to the extent that Melhuish and Phoenix (1987-88) have argued that the research itself has often contributed to the "problematization" and stigmatisation of this group of young women and that variables such as poverty and ethnicity are almost invariably confounded with maternal age. In a recent longitudinal study of Victorian pregnant and parenting young women using community services, Littlejohn (1995) found a similar association with poverty but there was also a high incidence of other problems such as a history of sexual abuse and violent relationships, and the absence of social support from extended family and the child's father. Littlejohn also found that homelessness and a high degree of mobility were common with many of the group moving several times in a year, and that this posed a problem for researchers in being able to keep track of the young women in a longitudinal study.

Melhuish & Phoenix (1987-88) call for researchers to understand the social environment of young mothers from their perspective. "Researchers are likely to have different perspectives from their respondents as a consequence of their age, class, education, assumptions about parenthood, and often ethnicity and gender. Therefore, it is important that the methodologies for studies of mothers under 20 years of age allow the perspectives of the mothers themselves (who constitute a diverse and complex group) to be taken into account". Hence, in this study it was decided to adopt an interview schedule which consisted mostly of open ended questions in order for both young women and volunteers to "tell their story" in their own words.

The assumption underpinning the Family Friends program is that the provision of social support will facilitate the emotional and social well-being of vulnerable young women in the

transition to motherhood. This assumption is supported by a growing body of research which demonstrates the strong association between social support and greater resilience in the face of stress (Gottlieb, 1981). Several studies have found that women with greater social support are, under conditions of stress, less likely to become depressed (Brown & Harris, 1978; Williams & Carmichael, 1991) and more likely to provide better care for their children (Colletta and Gregg, 1981).

Programs based on social support interventions have taken a variety of forms. The well established North American-inspired Big Brother/Big Sister program and the NSW based "Aunts and Uncles" program aim at providing vulnerable children and adolescents in need of a supportive same sex adult figure who supplements those in the child's family and social network. Programs aimed at supporting parents have tended to be very focussed on the parental role. North American and UK volunteer home visiting programs have been based on a peer parent education model and been evaluated according to child-related outcomes such as immunisation, developmental assessment and the prevention of child abuse and neglect (James, 1994).

There has been renewed interest in home visiting programs in Australia in recent years, and a number of North American and British models have been piloted in various States. Such programs have been seen as having the potential to achieve a number of outcomes, including decreasing the incidence of accidental injury in the home, and preventing maternal depression and child abuse. There has been inconclusive evidence as to their effectiveness in relation to such objectives, and it is hard to compare the effectiveness of one program model over another.

Some programs are highly targetted toward high risk families and communities while others are more universal. The duration and intensity of the involvement also varies as does the nature of their staffing. Some use professional staff (for example, maternal and child health nurses or social workers), some paraprofessional staff (for example family support workers) and a few use volunteers. Sometimes this distinction is not clear with volunteers in some programs sometimes performing more of a quasi-professional role than that of a friend, and visiting several families for a limited period.

For example, in the highly acclaimed Irish "Community Mothers Programme" each volunteer mother visits 15 mothers in her own community (a socially deprived part of Dublin) each month for the first year of the child's life. The visits are centred on a structured parent education program with written cartoon style materials and the program is directly concerned with improving the well-being of the infant (Johnson & Molloy, 1995). Its effectiveness has

been demonstrated in relation to increased infant immunisation and a range of other child developmental outcomes. Gains have also been found in relation to the volunteers.

In one form or another, such programs have a long history, dating back to the "friendly visiting" programs of the nineteenth century in which middle class women visited the homes of the poor. They re-emerged in a very different form in the 1970's, at a time which witnessed ideas relating to social networks and peer based support, achieving popularity.

For example, with a broad objective of preventing child abuse, the Australian "Mums' Chums" program developed within a south eastern Melbourne suburb in the mid-1970's, was more informal and more "mother centred", and based on the notion of the volunteer acting in a role akin to that of a "supportive neighbour" (Schwarz & Begg, 1980). Each volunteer, herself a mother in the local area recruited through the maternal and child health nurse, visited a new mother in her home in the first few months of the baby's life, helping her to get to know others in the community and from her own experience, normalising the process of adjustment to first time parenthood. Both the mothers and the volunteers gave positive reports of the experience but the lack of a control group prevented its efficacy in relation to the prevention of child abuse being assessed.

There is little research on how well the needs of adolescent mothers have been met by such befriending programs, or how they may need to be adapted to meet the particular needs of this group of parents and their children. The "practice wisdom" among those working with young women who are pregnant or have a child is that it is important to adopt an approach which is sensitive to issues of authority and control and which avoids overly focussing on the needs of the infant at the expense of the mother. This may be one of the reasons why peer-based models of groupwork have been popular in services working with young women.

Family Friends program staff were mindful of these issues and wanted to offer support to young women as young women, not just as new mothers. They also wanted to avoid offering a program to adolescents in which the volunteer was seen in a "one up" position in relation to expertise and experience in caring for children. Thus, while group sessions jointly attended by the volunteers and the young women included material relating to caring for infants and young children, volunteers and young women were seen as co-learners rather than the volunteer being a quasi-professional and the young woman a quasi-client. The volunteers in the Family Friends Program included women who were not parents as well as those who were.

Moreover, the primary focus was on the provision of social support to the young woman through a relationship which as far as possible, resembled a "normal" friendship". Part and parcel of a "normal friendship" is that prospective friends exercise choice in the selection of those with whom they are to become friends, and the program was designed to include a level of choice of friend, particularly for the young woman. There were few guidelines from other programs on how this might be best done. Nor did there appear to be any precedents in programs attempting to facilitate friendships for a highly vulnerable group of young women during the often tumultuous time of the pregnancy. Family Friends was thus a program which attempted to move into uncharted waters with few navigational aids.

3. Findings

The Interim Evaluation reported on a number of areas. These included: participants' sources of information about and reasons for joining the program; their expectations of the program; their perceptions of their initial contact with the program; the training sessions and "matching process"; and their experiences in the early stage of the friendships for those in the first and second cohorts. This Report provides a picture of the longer term outcome of the friendships in all three cohorts and some of the reflections of the program staff on the program. The Report also explores issues which may be relevant to organisations which are interested in developing similar programs, and discusses their possible agency auspice. system.

3.1 Demographic Description of Participants

The participants can be broadly described in demographic terms in the following way. The young women ranged in age from mid-teens to mid-twenties, and were mostly of Anglo-Celtic ethnicity and were generally from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds with little family support. The volunteers were all women aged from their early twenties to late fifties, were of more diverse ethnic backgrounds and lived in more socially advantaged circumstances than the young women. Most of the volunteers were married and had children, equally divided between younger women at home with toddlers and pre-school aged children, and older women in paid employment with post-adolescent children who were mostly still living at home. Several of the volunteers were women in their twenties who did not have children and were pursuing careers and/or further education. Such a demographic description does not do justice to the rich diversity of the people involved in the program.

3.2 Continuation of Contact

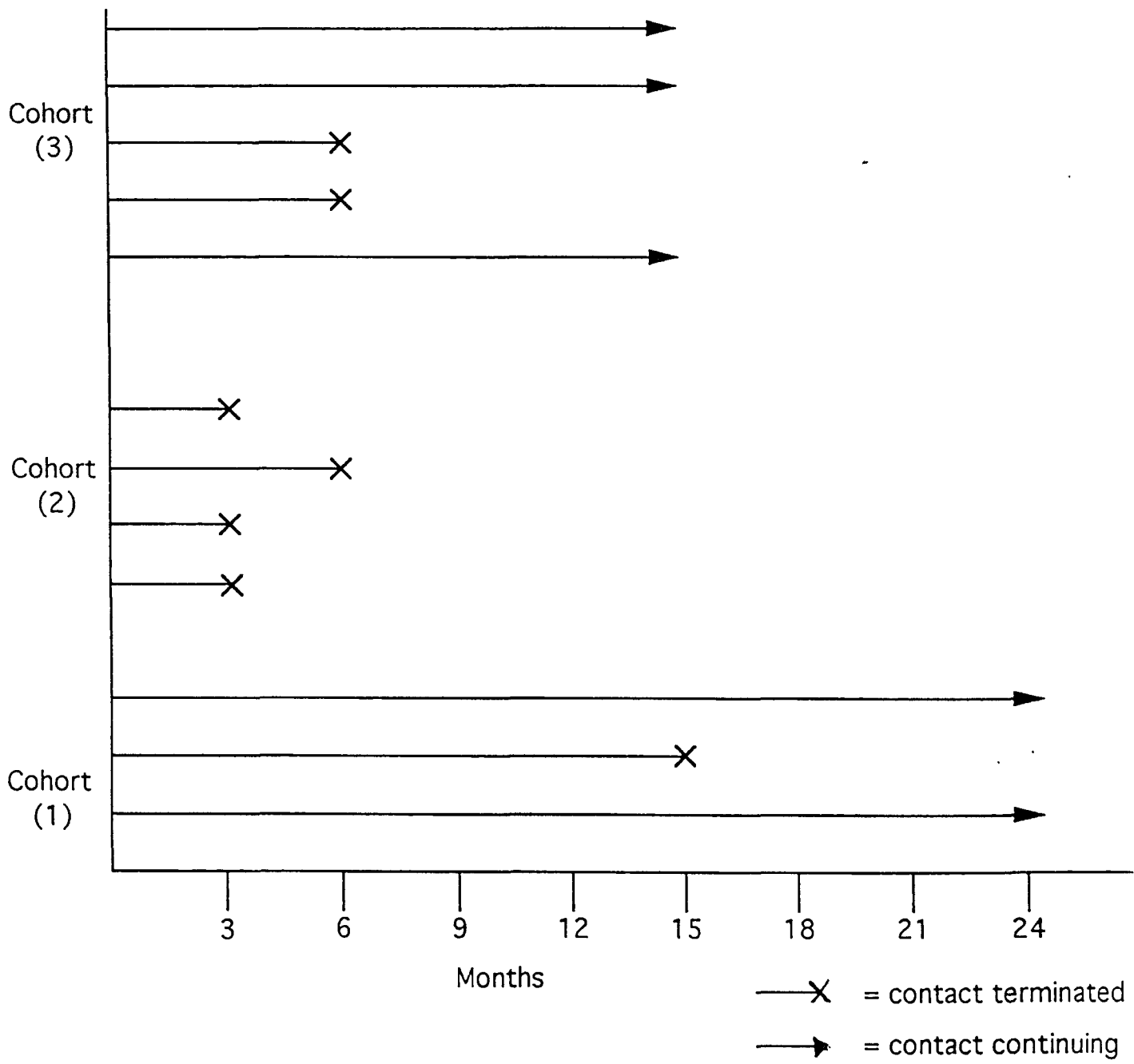
Of a total of twelve dyads (three dyads in Cohort 1, four dyads in Cohort 2 and five dyads in Cohort 3), five were continuing 15 months or more after formation. This is illustrated in the Table overpage in which those relationships which were continuing at the time of the final follow-up interviews (April-May 1997), are symbolised by an arrow and those which terminated are symbolised by a cross at the time which they terminated. Of the three dyads in Cohort 1, two were continuing at the 2 year follow-up and one had ceased after 15 months of contact. Of the four dyads in Cohort 2, three of these were not in contact at the 3 month follow-up and one had finished by 6 months. Of the five dyads in Cohort 3, three were continuing at the final follow-up (15 months), one had ceased contact by 3 months and one by the 6 months.

It is hard to identify any factors in how the program was offered which might explain why Cohort 2 was less successful than Cohort 1 and 3 in the formation of friendships. The reasons for the discontinuation of contact will be explored first in relation to those which ceased contact by 3 months, followed by those which ceased contact by 6 months and by 15 months.

In the three relationships which had discontinued contact by 3 months, none had actually become established in the first place. In two instances the young women suddenly moved interstate without a forwarding address after only one or two contacts with their volunteer. In both of these situations, the volunteers felt that they had connected well with the young women whose lives were in a turmoil, and they expressed a deep concern about their welfare, a sense of loss in relation to what might have been, and a hope that the young woman might one day contact them again.

In the third case, which also ended before it had begun, the circumstances were rather different, although the young woman in this instance also moved house without a forwarding address. This volunteer perceived herself to have made a great effort to meet with the young woman and was left feeling hostile and exploited when this proved unsuccessful. The volunteer, herself a young mother with infant and pre-school aged children, had responded to a poster seeking volunteers for the program which she had seen in her local maternal and child health centre. During the follow-up interview she spoke at some length of her strong need for support and a friend, and this may have contributed to the difficulty she experienced in tolerating what she perceived as skewed reciprocity in the relationship with the young woman. Because their whereabouts were unknown, none of these young women could be contacted so their perceptions of these relationships remain known.

Table 1 Duration of Contact between Young Women and Volunteers in the the Family Friends Program



In the three relationships where contact was continuing at three months but had ceased by the six month follow-up, relocation was also a significant factor in two of the three cases, but there were additional factors as well. In one case the young woman moved interstate, and while it was not possible to contact her, the volunteer reported that the relationship had not been particularly strong and that she was unsure if she had been of any assistance to the young woman who was a refugee with limited English. In the case in which the volunteer was about to move interstate, the relationship had virtually ended and had been difficult to establish as the young woman had an intellectual disability and her motivation to maintain contact fluctuated greatly. She was also under a great strain due to the involvement of child welfare services in her life.

In the third case, relocation was not a factor and the contact was discontinued at the insistence of the pregnant woman who had severe emotional problems, and with whom this volunteer experienced considerable frustration in her attempts to form a relationship.

For differing reasons, none of these young women were able to be interviewed either. In the first case this was because of a lack of a forwarding address. In the second this was at the request of the young woman's mother who wished to protect her intellectually disabled daughter from the added stress and confusion of an interview during a very difficult period in her life. In the third dyad in which the relationship was terminated at the woman's initiative, permission for an interview was withdrawn.

In the dyad which ceased contact by 15 months, this too was at the initiative of the young woman who was able to be interviewed, and who finally brought the relationship to an end after struggling for almost a year following an unfortunate incident early in the relationship which had weakened her trust in the volunteer. This young woman, and her partner, the baby's father, also felt that the volunteer saw her as "a welfare case" rather than a friend and found this insulting. While the relationship had been very positive in its early stages, the volunteer was also hurt by the incident which she felt was not of her making, and which also left her family feeling that she had been unfairly distrusted and humiliated.

Thus, in only one of the 7 dyads which discontinued contact was it possible to interview the young woman. It is therefore hard to be definitive about the reasons for the failure of these relationships to evolve into the type of friendships which the program had hoped to facilitate. However, it would appear that the reasons for the discontinuation were diverse, and were mainly related to relocation but also related to situational, personality and relationship factors. Nevertheless, by examining what appeared to be the "therapeutic ingredients" in the five relationships which did evolve into self-sustaining friendships, and where it has been possible

to interview all the young women as well as the volunteers, it is possible to generate some hypotheses about the conditions under which such friendships may be sustained.

3.3 Participants' Experiences of the Continuing Relationships

Through a series of interviewer-administered questionnaires (See Appendix) at different follow-up points as outlined above, a large amount of qualitative data was collected, mainly through mostly open-ended questions. In the final interview information relating to the following was sought: the frequency of contact with each other; who usually initiated contact; where the contact it occurred; whether they found it enjoyable; how they would describe what the relationship was like; the impact of the friendship on their other relationships; any problems which had occurred; and how they envisaged the future of the friendship. The interview concluded with questions about the Family Friends Program, how it had been implemented, whether it was the sort of program which they would recommend others to become involved in, and any other aspects of the program on which they might wish to comment.

3.3.1 Frequency and Location of Contact

There was a high level of congruence between the volunteer and the young woman in each of the five continuing dyads in regard to the frequency of contact with each other. Contact was defined as including telephone as well as face to face interaction. The two dyads with the least frequent contact reported this as occurring on average about once a month. Distance, work and study demands for both parties were seen as the reason for the gradual decrease in the contact between them. One dyad had developed a pattern of approximately fortnightly telephone contact with very occasional face to face contact being possible due to distance (the young woman and her partner had moved to a rural location) and heavy work commitments by the volunteer.

The other three dyads reported contact as being weekly or more. Much of this contact was also by phone. In three of the five dyads it was reported by both parties that contact was initiated by each about equally, while in one dyad the contact was largely initiated by the young woman and in another almost exclusively by the volunteer. When there was face to face contact the location of this varied. In one dyad it was almost always at the volunteer's home as both parties felt most comfortable about this arrangement, while others met in the young woman's home or in public places such as shopping centres and cafes. The nature of the activity was "passive recreation" - talking and having coffee or a meal together, and usually the child was present,

which placed limits on the nature of what they might do together, particularly as the toddlers became more mobile.

Except in one dyad where the volunteer had also befriended the young woman's mother and siblings, and contact had extended to going out together as a group and staying at each other's homes, it was unusual for others to be present. Occasionally relatives or friends would be present if the contact occurred in the home, but this was not usually planned. In one instance the volunteer and her partner and the young woman and her partner had dinner together at the volunteer's home.

3.3.2 Nature of the Relationship

When asked to describe the relationship in their own words, there was considerable diversity in their responses. It is hard to paraphrase these and still convey a sense of the meaning, so they are presented as verbatim quotes. The young women's responses were:

"Like a sister relationship or a best friend relationship."

"----- is like a big sister. I was the eldest and never had someone to go to for advice and support..."

"It's just unique ... She just fills that gap. She's a person like no other person. Even though it's an artificial set-up it's quite normal - she's just like a friend."

"It could be a little bit better on my behalf (reference to not making contact) ..."

"A very good friendship."

The volunteer responses were:

"It's a strange type of relationship - it's an older-young person one but not a parental relationship, more like a mentor..."

"I think slightly strained because I've always got to make that contact ..."

"It's very much seeking advice ... she'd like me to think she's doing well."

“Not as constant as I would like it to be - that’s mostly my fault. We’re both studying - snowed under.”

“It’s just a friend but when I put them into the refuge it’s more like a pseudo-social worker It falls on me because I’m the only one constantly there ... otherwise it’s just like a normal friendship.”

While neither the volunteers nor the young women spoke of the relationship in terms of a mother-daughter relationship, it appeared to the researcher that in the two dyads in which the volunteer was old enough to be the young woman’s mother, there was an element of this, or at least an aunt-niece type of relationship. In the three dyads where there was not a significant age difference (less than 6 or 6 or 7 years), it was more a peer relationship. Another aspect of the relationships which struck the researcher was the apparent absence of concern about social class differences, and a clear sense of equality in the relationships. While this area was not explored directly, a number of the volunteers revealed a sensitivity to the issues surrounding this, and the young women did not seem to be self-conscious about this in the way they spoke, one even commenting on how she found it a very positive feature of the relationship. Of course, this may not have been so for the young women who chose not to continue the relationship and for one of these young women and her male partner, there was a negative element to this.

When asked if they enjoyed the relationship, all said that they did, and identified why this was so and what they got out of it. Again, this is best captured in their own words:

“It’s just like she is my big sister. I talk to her about everything. She was at my daughter’s birth and she’s her godmother. She gives me advice on things and I help her and we do a lot of things together.”

“I wish we saw each other more but it’s hard at the moment. I enjoy spending time together and listening to her”

“I just know she’s there and ... she rings me and I know she thinks about me.”

“Just enjoyment of talking.”

"Having a friend basically."

The volunteers' responses to the same questions were:

"Oh God, what do I get out of it? I don't know. Just a friendship I suppose. Sometimes a sense of worth - nothing noble but just being there for a friend, that's a warming feeling - a need to be needed."

"I don't think about it. I don't not enjoy it. ... In some ways it's like one of the other kids ..."

"Normal things you get out of a friendship ... (that) you can have some useful impact in her life."

"I have an advocacy role ... that's a skill I have but they also provide for me - I can't cook and I'll go around there for dinner."

"It takes me out of my own sphere entirely ... it's like fiction made real for a whole group of middle class comfortable people like me, all these things in the newspaper aren't real. Being with ----- makes you realise ... If I can feel I'm making a slight difference to her life I'm doing something worthwhile. I like her and I admire her."

When asked how they saw the future of the relationship, the young women stated that:

"Continuing, yes."

"I hope for it to continue. Maybe it will be one of those friendships where we only see each other once a month or something..."

"Really well. (It's as if) she's always been there ... I wouldn't want to give her up after 5 years!"

"Just be best friends forever."

"Continuing, yes, I hope so."

The volunteers responded to this question in the following ways:

"I think we'll continue to call each other. It may just die on its own - contacting each other less and less. For the next year or 18 months I'll be there in the background ... I see myself involved with her as it has been this year - a lot less than last year."

"Contact will be less now she's in the country but as the bulk of it has been by phone I don't think that will change very much -- our physical contact will be very limited in the future."

"I just hope it continues as a normal friendship."

"Forever as long as nothing major happens Just like any other friendship."

"It would be nice to think that if she manages to keep well we could do normal things like going to the Victoria Market ... Encourage her to get back to study and find something she'd like to do."

3.3.3 Impact on Significant Others

Information was also sought about the impact of the friendship on other relationships and how each participant thought she was perceived by the other one's family and friends. This had been problematic in at least two of the dyads which had not continued (for example the reservations of male partners of both one volunteer and one young woman). In the relationships which were continuing neither the volunteers nor the young women perceived that the friendship had adversely affected their other relationships, and in several instances, potential difficulties of this nature had been handled sensitively by the volunteers.

For example, they had gone out of their way to try and develop a rapport with the young woman's male partner, and in instances in which the volunteer was seen by the young woman as "the good mother" (in contrast her own mother), the volunteers had gently discouraged such comparison.

In regard to the volunteers' family and friends, generally there was support for and interest in their involvement in the program, apart from some mild concern on the part of elderly parents and adolescent children who may have wondered if their own needs might not be met. This was not so in the two dyads which had terminated contact after some acrimony in which case

the relatives of the volunteers were reported to be very indignant about what they perceived as the exploitation of the volunteer.

The child was also an actor in this complex web of relationships. While the volunteers were very positive in their attitude toward the young women's babies, as was outlined in the Interim Evaluation, most had taken great care to focus on the mother and not to displace her by paying a lot of attention to the baby. This continued to be the pattern, with the focus of the relationship being very clearly that between the two women. In several cases, children were removed by child protection services and the relationship between the volunteers and two of these mothers were among the strongest of all the dyads. These two volunteers never defined their involvement in terms of the babies, and proved to be very valuable sources of support to the mothers both at an emotional level and at a practical level, assisting with access visits and acting in an advocacy role as a relative might in these circumstances.

3.4 Participants' Perceptions of the Program

The participants' perceptions of the program were sought in detail for the Interim Evaluation and these were generally very positive. They spoke highly of the program staff, and had few recommendations for changes except in relation to "the matching process", as discussed in the Interim Evaluation. At the final follow-up there was little difference in what was said, although some raised points which they had not mentioned earlier in the study.

For example, one of the young women raised the issue of involving their partners. She described how her partner, the father of the baby, had felt left out at first. "He was left in the dark when I was going (to the group sessions) He felt a bit hurt ; 'How come they call it Family Friends and only you can go?' he asked." The volunteer in this instance had made an effort to connect with him but in one of the cases in which contact was terminated after a considerable period of time, the continuing alienation of the male partner had been an important contributing factor.

A few volunteers expressed the need for someone with whom they could talk and receive some "reassurance to hang on in there" as one put it, after the program formally ended and this support was no longer readily available. The system of each young woman having a "community worker" did not always happen and in a couple of cases the need to have one central contact person who co-ordinated the various services involved and to whom the volunteer could turn, was marked. In one instance the volunteer filled the vacuum of a case

manager, and in another case, the volunteer was eventually able to connect with the young woman's mental health worker, who recognised the volunteer's significance in the life of her client.

Other points which had been mentioned in the Interim Evaluation were reiterated, such as the difficulty of sustaining a friendship across significant distances, especially if participants were dependent upon public transport. This proved to be a major problem for a number of the dyads, and was one of the reasons for so much telephone contact.

There was overwhelming support for the concept of the program and many expressed the view that there should be more programs of this nature. All the participants answered in the affirmative to the question "Would you recommend to a friend that they become involved in a program like Family Friends?". One particularly vulnerable and very young mother who was deeply attached to her volunteer whom she saw as a role model and a "big sister" added with obvious pride, "It's that good that I might be becoming a volunteer. I'm seriously thinking about being a volunteer for the Brotherhood of St Laurence."

3.5 Program Staff Reflections

The two part-time social workers who delivered the program were interviewed at regular intervals throughout the first year of the program and at the final follow-up time at which the participants were being interviewed. The program had changed somewhat from the first to the third cohorts, due to different circumstances (such as difficulty in encouraging the attendance of the young women in subsequent cohorts) and in the light of how certain aspects of the program had previously worked. Thus, as described in the Interim Evaluation, the matching process changed considerably to a system in which the young women were not asked to choose a particular volunteer but where the program staff suggested possible matchings and sought the views of both the prospective partners to this.

In the follow-up interview, both the program staff were asked in an unstructured interview to reflect overall on what had occurred and what their thoughts were about transplanting this program model to other agency settings. Below are some of the verbatim comments made.

"There was a positive sense of achievement, that 'the idea basically worked', the notion of friendship ... (We had) a very positive feeling that we were doing something good ..."

“The group process worked very well - the volunteer group and then coming together with the young women - the process worked and I wouldn't change that.”

“ I agree but what I would do about the whole program would be to make it one of many things an agency offers, like a community health centre or a maternal and child health centre - an agency where you had access to volunteers and young women ... Have a wide target group - there were people who came to us who didn't quite fit our criteria such as under 25 or from the inner city area so be clear about why you are restricting eligibility criteria. The common factor is parenting rather than reinforcing the adolescence of the mother other workers would not refer people to us unless they knew us personally so someone needs to go and talk about the program to other agencies... I don't know if the group process would work that well (in a local community setting) - maybe more informal one-to-one linking if it's a local agency...(but) it's very tempting for someone who sees isolated women with lots of needs to think 'this program will take this burden off me - she (the volunteer) will do it for me' and then it moves from being a friend to being a family support worker - that means death to the friendship ... Therefore the way the worker sets it up it needs to emphasise equality and reciprocity, that the benefits go both ways ... While acknowledging the fact that the young woman may not be as skilled as the other, and the need for tolerance ... The attitude of the worker is therefore vital - promoting friendship, not substitute parent-aides.”

“(While) there is a down side to volunteers wanting to do good, you've got to capture that resource, it's terribly important to seize that 'putting something back' motivation and channel it into a friendship.”

“... Confidentiality issues are also important but I think we attach more importance to it than others do. We should give people choices around confidentiality. If two people meet in a community centre they use their own judgment anyway..”

“There's also more potential for stigmatisation in a local setting. Is the artificial link between you more obvious to others? You know - 'Mary needs Sally to help' type of thing...”

When asked what they saw as the possible “therapeutic ingredients” in the dyads which worked, they remarked:

“The volunteers were able to regard it as a friendship and there was equality in the relationship .. Also the young women were not as damaged or if they were, the volunteer had exceptional skills It's really important for volunteers from different backgrounds to be prepared to enter

the young woman's world - it's also been good for the young women to enter another world - to access the different lifestyle of the volunteer and that's quite difficult --- need to pick up with volunteers who have openness and the characteristics of a volunteer which make for a good friend are more important than whether they have children or not .."

"When things don't work out the importance of offering a debriefing process to prevent a sense of failure or rejection ... It's a real shame that some of the matches didn't work but I think some would have had it not been for the interstate mobility It had quite an impact on the volunteers who had made a big commitment and done the intensive training..."

5. Conclusion

Program evaluation specialists have argued that only programs which have achieved stability and their optimum level of functioning should be subjected to evaluation (Hawe, Degeling & Hall, 1990). In a pilot program, evaluation is always imposed upon a program before it has had a chance to mature. Nevertheless, one can ask to what extent did the Family Friends Program achieve its objective "to provide young women with a friendship with a volunteer woman that will last at least 5 years ... (in which) the focus of the friendship was on meeting the need of the young woman for a friend, not on the volunteer being a parent educator"?

It is too early to assess the longer term outcomes in this evaluation but of the twelve dyads, five were in continuing contact at the last follow-up period (2 years later for the first cohort and 15 months later for the third cohort). By what yardstick does one measure this outcome in the absence of any benchmarks for such a program? Given the vulnerability and the high mobility of the group of young women this program was designed to reach, what is a reasonable expectation in terms of the proportion of dyads formed to those which continued? Furthermore, can "success" be measured solely by the continuation of the relationships? For example, was there value in relationships which were supportive for a shorter period of time, and was there value in the knowledge that support was potentially available even if it was not accessed?

One of the researchers evaluating The Child Welfare League of America's Adolescent Parents Project has written that "Dreams of 'conclusive findings' have been replaced by more humble aspirations of achieving 'incremental clarification' (Miller 1988). This is also true of this study. The difficulty in following up those young women who did not continue in the program

makes it hard to draw conclusions about these questions. What can be said on the basis of the continuing relationships is that both the young women and the volunteers reported positive experiences of friendship, and that these relationships were very much focussed on them as individuals first and mothers second, and they were not of the substitute parent aide variety.

It can also be said that the program reached its target group as referrals included some highly vulnerable young women with extensive involvement in services such as child protection, mental health and disability. This was also true of those who continued in the program, demonstrating that it is possible to engage and maintain some of these young women in a befriending or mentoring program. Moreover, in regard to those who did not continue in the program it would appear that in most instances this was not related to problems in the relationship but to other factors in their life and especially to relocation. In some of these cases however, there was also probably a failure to engage with the program from the outset, particularly in the second and third cohorts in which the attendance of the young women in the group sessions was very low. In a number of cases it appears as if these young women may have been less enthusiastic about joining the program than those who referred them, and they did not have the opportunity to be part of a peer group which normalised the program and which allowed them to get to know the volunteers prior to the matching process.

Despite very positive responses from a range of service providers who were consulted about the program in its preparation phase, right from the outset it proved very hard to get those working in services which brought them into contact with vulnerable young women who were pregnant, to refer them to the program. It is unclear to what extent this "resistance" was the service providers or the young women's. It may be the latter and that the pregnancy was such a time of turmoil and uncertainty for these young women that it was hard to focus much beyond the event of birth. Investing in the development of a new friendship may be just too difficult under the tumultuous conditions faced by some.

There is some research to support the hypothesis that in the face of adversity and situational stress individuals actually restrict their social network to a few trusted others and withdraw from other relationships and avoid making new ones. That is, there may be an incongruence between what a program like Family Friends is offering and how young pregnant women perceive their needs and priorities at this time. While still difficult, it proved easier to recruit young women after their babies were born, although retaining them in the program proved to be just as difficult.

Although it may be less difficult to recruit young women after they have had the baby, partly because their desperate need for support is by that stage very obvious to service providers they encounter in obstetric hospitals or emergency housing services, they may be in such a state of active crisis and instability that it is still very hard to establish a new relationship under such conditions. Sudden moves interstate may also be the way in which some young women attempt to deal with the situation in which they find themselves.

Distance proved to be a major obstacle. The program was intended to serve young women living in the inner city but given the gentrification of the inner city it is not surprising that nearly all of those recruited lived well outside the inner city and quite a number lived on extreme outer fringe of the metropolitan area. In most cases the geographical dispersion of the partners proved to be a serious obstacle. Where volunteers had their own cars this was not an insurmountable obstacle but the time involved in travelling from one part of a very sprawling metropolis to another, still constituted a significant problem. This raises the question of the viability of providing such a program on a centralised rather than a regional or local basis.

While the high mobility of the young women is such that it could not be expected that all or even most would remain within a particular locality or region of Melbourne, it may be that in the early phase of friendship formation, closer geographical proximity would help in the development of relationships to the stage at which they could survive the relocation of one or both parties as occurs in many "natural friendships" which are originally neighbourhood based. It must be noted however, that in the relationships were continuing, distance did not seem to have prevented their continuation, and the telephone was used to maintain the link.

This leads on to the issue of what type of agency auspice is best suited to such a program and whether a program such as Family Friends is best delivered as a "stand alone" program or within a context of a range of other services from agencies such as Neighbourhood Houses, maternal and child health centres, or family support agencies? Such agencies with other programs (for example, recreational, social and self-help groups) may enable both young women and volunteers to be recruited by staff who know both relatively well. Even if volunteers could not be recruited in sufficient numbers from within the agency, information distributed through the local or regional service network, workplaces, newsletters and libraries, shopping centres, schools and churches etc., could reach suitable volunteers living within reasonable proximity.

An inter-agency partnership may be a useful model and this was pioneered in the Mums' Chums Project in which a small family support and counselling agency worked in close

collaboration with maternal and child health nurses in one local government area. This model had a number of advantages. It reached families through a universal and non-stigmatising service such as maternal and child health and the training and support of volunteers was done by the family support agency. This program also countered potential stigmatisation by inviting every new mother to participate and later on, to consider becoming a volunteer herself in the program. A number of successful programs, dating from AA to the international award winning UK child abuse prevention program "Newpin" program, have found that building into the program opportunities to make the transition from "helpee" to "helper" is a very positive and self-esteem enhancing experience for participants.

Within such a universal mother-to-mother befriending program there would be room to carefully match some volunteers with women in need of greater support. Such a program could be offered as an alternative to the new mothers' groups provided by most maternal and child health centres for those women who did not wish to be involved in groups, or as a complementary program which recruited participants through such groups. A family service agency with a local or regional focus may also be in a better position to provide the type of long term support which is necessary in some situations. It could also deliver a more family-centred program in which fathers might be engaged.

Despite the cutbacks to many family services in Victoria in recent years, programs such as Family Friends are now in keeping with latest direction in Victorian Human Services policy aimed at broadening the role of primary health services such as maternal and child health to perform a more central role in facilitating a healthy transition to parenthood and preventing child abuse and neglect. Closer linkages are now being forged between agencies such as community health centres and local maternal and child health services in a number of "high risk" regions in relation to child abuse and neglect, which could enable this type of program to be well-located in the service system.

Moreover, some philanthropic trusts and foundations have recently expressed a specific interest in supporting the development of innovative family-centred programs aimed at vulnerable communities which have the characteristics of prevention and volunteer involvement (Scott, 1997). Currently there is additional State funding available for pilot programs of this nature which could enable a variety of models in relation to agency auspice to be compared. The Brotherhood of St Laurence's Family Friends Program has made a valuable contribution to practice in relation to social support interventions and the transition to parenthood, and it is to be hoped that others will build upon this.

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