

Case study

Putting the family at the centre



Family Action: building stronger families ©iStock.com/CEFutcher

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The challenge: demonstrating the difference services make

Back in 2010, Family Action was looking for a tool that would demonstrate the difference that their work made to families. At the same time they wanted the process of measuring their impact to be useful and engaging for staff, commissioners and, above all, the families they worked with.

The charity’s management tried out various tools but found that for the most part staff didn’t fill them in. However, when they piloted the Family Star in two of their services in the Wandsworth area, they found that both staff and families responded well. From these small beginnings, the Family Star spread organically but rapidly throughout the whole organisation. In September 2010 it was adopted by the senior management team as the charity’s key management tool.

The process: integrating the Star at every level

After the pilot, Family Action adopted a change management approach to implementing the Star, running workshops with senior management across the organisation to identify services that should introduce the Star, and developing an action plan.

Strong leadership was crucial to the process. Family Action needed to make sure that the Star was used with all families, and focused a lot of attention on supporting keyworkers, whose methods of working with families would change as they started to use the Star. The Star is now used at all initial assessments with families and helps to structure keywork thereafter.

Family Action took the decision to train and licence its own trainers to deliver training internally and provide ongoing support in the implementation process, and there are now six qualified Outcomes Star trainers at the charity. It also took care to integrate the Family Star fully into its working systems and Safeguarding Standards – a critical step if the Star was to fulfil its potential as a key management tool.

The benefits: engagement at every level

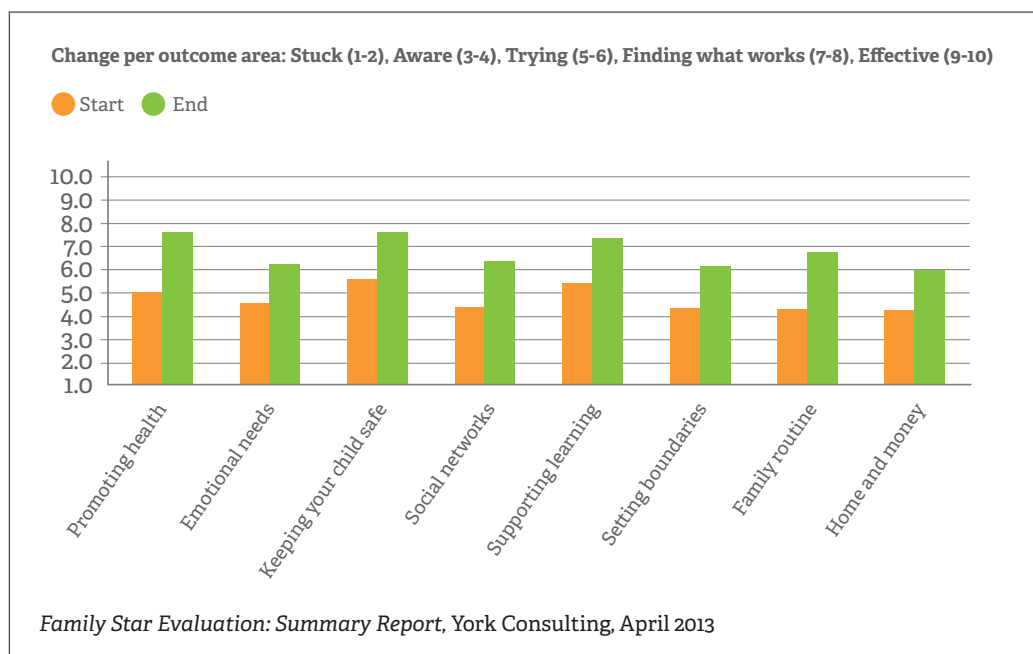
The Family Star has put the family right at the centre of the work. The initial assessment is used to identify where a parent is on each of the Star scales. It's a two-way process, meaning that the parent is actively involved in their own assessment – before the Star was introduced, parental input was far more limited. Not surprisingly, this has led to greater active engagement by parents. Parents also find that the Star's visual nature makes it easy to track progress and pinpoint strengths and weaknesses so that they can develop a targeted change programme.

Keyworkers find that the Star helps them communicate how each family has changed in a clear and standardised way – one of the things that the Star has helped crystallise for the organisation is an explicit theory of change to underpin their work. Keyworkers use the Star to structure feedback at “team around the child” meetings with multiple agencies. The Star also helps them clarify when they should reduce or conclude casework, leading to stronger caseload management.

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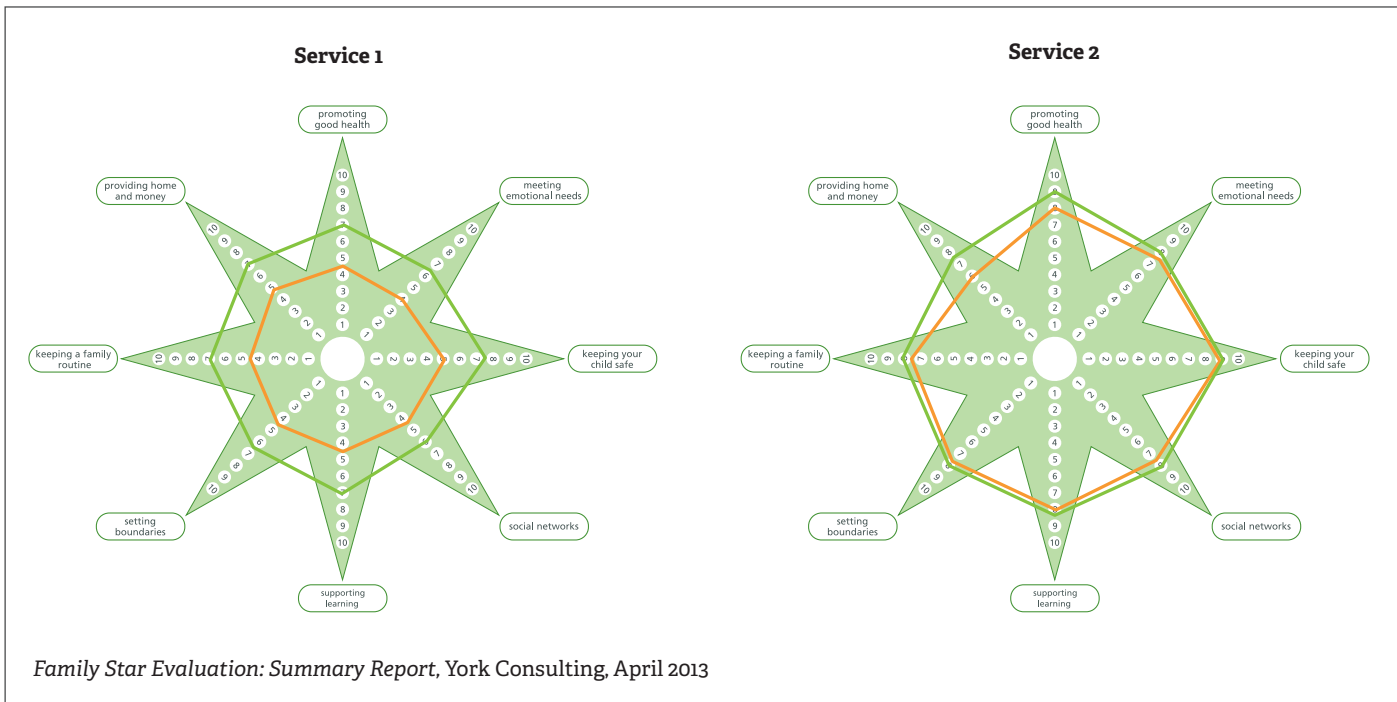
The data: an insight into service delivery

An evaluation of Family Action's Star data carried out by York Consulting in April 2013 found that the data helped services demonstrate the progress made with families. The chart below of average start and end scores for one service shows progress being made across all areas. The evaluators also found that Star data helped to identify where families were struggling most. The chart shows that families' biggest challenges were with setting boundaries, family routine and home and money. The service's biggest impact was on setting boundaries and family routine.



Using the Star Online to record all Star data has meant that Family Action can benchmark service performance and identify performance differences across similar services. York Consulting's evaluation highlighted one such review of two services (shown overleaf).

The average starting scores in Service 1 were as expected in a project of its kind, and the average change in scores indicated that families were making real progress. However, in Service 2 starting scores were very high and progress negligible.



Investigation by managers revealed that some families in Service 2 did not want to acknowledge the issues they were facing, and that workers did not have the skills to engage in the difficult conversations needed to support the parents in acknowledging their problems.

A workshop was organised to share learning across the two services and workers given extra training. Star data collected after this point showed more appropriate starting scores in Service 2.

The evidence: an effective outcomes tool

York Consulting's evaluation of Family Action's Star data, based on more than 3,200 completed Stars and interviews with stakeholders, concluded that the Family Star was "an effective management and measurement tool for family support work".

Researchers commented: "A unique characteristic of the tool is that it engages families and frontline staff, as well as managers and commissioners, in the Journey of Change, and provides timely management information to benchmark performance at an aggregated level."

They also praised the fact that the Star is a distance-travelled tool that breaks outcomes down into smaller steps. "Given that many of the family outcomes specified in current Payments By Results (PBR) contracts are high level outcomes (anti-social behaviour, school attendance and so on) and can take some time to achieve and evidence, it is important to have a measure of distance travelled towards meeting these outcomes. The Family Star is an effective tool for measuring intermediate outcomes and showing progress made to date towards ultimate targets. It also helps make the link between intensive family support and achieving those high level outcomes."

"An effective tool for measuring intermediate outcomes and showing progress made to date towards ultimate targets."

Family Star Evaluation: Summary Report, April 2013, York Consulting

The Outcomes Star™ is a family of tools for supporting and measuring change when working with people.



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