

“Nice Noise”

Parent education and playgroups

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Parent education describes an enormous range of different activities, from highly structured programs to informal chats designed to improve the abilities of parents and in fewer instances to build on their strengths. Playgroups can be structured or unstructured, supported or parent-led, but always involve parents and children spending time together. Both parent education and playgroups are forms of early intervention in that they directly provide support to children in their early years as well as building the capacities of parents and communities working with children. Ultimately, the aim of parent education and playgroups is to improve the lives of children, and parents, and to enhance the long-term outcomes for children in terms of psycho-social development, education and psychological health.

In this article we focus on a number of the Stronger Families Fund projects, funded in the first round of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS), which have a parent education and playgroup focus to their work. Staff and project participants from sixteen projects were interviewed and provided feedback in relation to parent education and playgroups. Comments are provided from these projects and are referred to by the location of the project.

What the projects did and how they worked

The projects were involved in a broad range of parent-education related activities. The most common activity types were playgroups or family activ-

ity sessions and organised parent workshops. Projects organised community excursions and had been involved in individual family support, with parents dropping in to their service for information and/or advice. In one case, in-home support using volunteers was provided. Nine projects were involved in more than one type of service provision, ranging from informal playgroups to structured parent education sessions.

The focus of activities also varied, with projects reporting a focus on parenting issues (including children's behavioural issues), play and child health and development. All projects, with the exception of one (a franchised program with prescribed format and compliance requirements), were flexible and adaptable to the needs identified by parents, the community or other participants. The amount of structure in programs varied across projects and programs within each project. For example, some projects presented a series of workshops, delivered over a specified period on set topics; some were semi-structured with issues addressed on a week-by-week basis according to participant needs; and others discussed parenting issues as they came up in an informal setting, such as at playgroup or parent activity group sessions. A number of projects provided services that included the full range of approaches.

Where projects provided a series of parent workshops, most were two to two and a half hours long and held

once a week over a six to ten week period. Playgroup and parent activity groups provided parent education on an ongoing basis, usually to the same group once a week. One project ran for two years (after an initial eight week intensive program). The time of day varied. Venues varied from community centres and halls, to schools, hospitals and family centres, with four projects reporting outdoor activities.

Project participants were generally parents (overwhelmingly mothers) with children, although some projects had involvement from other community members. Four projects mentioned that they provided newsletters to give information and advice to parents and the community. Other activities included:

- mobile services that provide playgroup and parent education by going out into the community (2 projects);
- facilitator training (3 projects);
- a family “communications” camp;
- a parent activity group (craft);
- a homework club; and
- a kids day out (one-off event)

A strong theme running through all projects is that they do not exist in isolation, but work with parents, the community and other organisations to deliver their project. Partnerships with community, child health, early education services or clinics appear to be particularly strong for providing guest speakers or outreach support. Other agencies involved in projects included schools, libraries, TAFEs, counselling services and local government.



The diversity of parental preferences about parent education was very evident. Some people prefer structure and knowing what is expected as part of a program, whereas other families prefer to meet and chat informally or have specific needs met as they come up. One project mentioned that it is “good to run both structured and semi-structured” programs. Another mentioned the need to be “structured, but flexible” with modules for a series of workshops determined from brainstorming with parents. A third mentioned that some parents prefer more structured playgroups that cover specific things like rhymes and stories, sharing time and monthly talks.

The franchised program had much in common with other projects in that it was based around a mixture of social interaction between parents and a time where parents were able to concentrate on playing with one of their children. The project worker found they needed to change very little of its core framework or activities for its implementation in an Australian setting. However, there was a need to change some of the evaluation material, which was not appropriate for the community.

What the projects say about parent education and playgroups

There were two main themes that emerged from the interviews with project workers. The first was the importance of parent education and playgroups for the community. Second, a number of valuable reflections emerged on what works best in implementing parent education and playgroups.

Theme 1: The importance of parent education/playgroups

Project workers highlighted the importance of early intervention parent education and playgroups. They report that:

- research emphasises the benefits of parent education and early intervention;
- they have been very committed to parent education;
- parenting is complex and parents need support; and
- any work in this area needs to incorporate the needs of the existing community within the delivery of

parent education and playgroup services.

Several project workers talked about the body of research detailing the links between early childhood development and later health and functioning, and the positive, long-lasting effects that positive parenting can have on this.

“Research has increasingly emphasised the importance of the parents’ role. The early years are important to the development of the brain and for future outcomes for individuals regarding physical and mental health.”

Geraldton

“Early intervention research shows that it is valuable that kids are stimulated and have access to various play and other activities as part of their development.”

Launceston

All of the Stronger Families Fund projects interviewed were very passionate and committed to making a positive difference to families and children.

“Providing support and encouragement has a positive impact on parents, and this ripples through the rest of the family. Happier parents make for happier children.”

Southside ACT

“We think it’s important to bring people together, create an awareness of services that are available, provide information and update others, widen individual networks and prevent isolation.”

Ashmont

Projects recognised that parenting was both complex and difficult and that changes in society had made it more difficult for people to take on this role. They saw their work as important because of the changing role of parents.

“Parenting has changed a lot. Society has more demands on families.”

Illawarra

“Parents do not have the support they had in previous generations to learn parenting.”

Geraldton

“Many parents feel isolated and lack confidence in their parenting.”

Redlands



In many cases, projects using a community development and action research approach talked with parents and other community members to find out what services were needed. Parenting programs and playgroups were specifically requested. The right of parents to determine what activities were provided was considered extremely important by workers.

“Parents were consulted about what they would like from the project and that included playgroups.”

Enfield

“The area has many highly disadvantaged families. We need to maintain a self-determining process, not an imposing one.”

Enfield

Theme 2: Best practice in delivering parent education or playgroups

Projects reported that certain types of parent education had proved to be useful and relevant to participants. These included: the use of groups; a strengths-based approach; a focus on empowering parents; the importance of networking with other services; and the importance of bringing parents and children together in parent education and playgroups.

Social links help to reduce isolation experienced by many parents, and to “normalise” the experience of parenting. Parenting education or playgroups that used a group format brought parents together with other parents, encouraging social connections:

“People tend to feel that they are the only ones experiencing this, then they find out that all parents are having trouble with their five-year olds because they are all tired at the end of the term, not because they are a bad parent.”

Ashmont

“The parents really bonded together as a group and at the end of the eight weeks wanted to keep doing things together as a group. They had never had the opportunity to be involved as a group before.”

Darwin

All of the workers built into their activities a concrete and deliberate focus on informal socialising and talking between parents. This gave parents the opportunity to form friendships and to help each other informally, passing on their own experience and learning and benefiting from that of others. In this process, parents learned that other parents also faced difficulties; this normalised or destigmatised their own difficulties. They also found that they could be useful and helpful to other parents, increasing their confidence in themselves and how they parent their child, and encouraging them to help and learn from other parents.

Workers and services placed importance on addressing the needs of the parent as a person, and not just as a parent. Many projects did this by providing things like budgeting training and stress management skills. This approach was about supporting parents to build their own strengths, which is important individually for parents, and also for their children.

“The course is as much about lifting self-esteem and forming networks as it is about parenting. It is important for them to know and understand that they need to be kind to themselves as parents.”

Redlands

“I don’t think you can do parenting skills in isolation. With parenting comes other issues. It is about general motivation and self-enhancement, ways of reaching self-actualisation. When those things happen there is stronger more confident parenting.”

Peterborough

Despite workers feeling that parents are very important in the education of their children, they noticed that parents can often feel that others are more expert. This is the basis of workers emphasising and drawing on the parents’ own skills and expertise and their knowledge and understanding of their child. Giving parents more information about parenting methods and strategies increased the choices available to them, and allowed them to



“The area has many highly disadvantaged families. We need to maintain a self-determining process, not an imposing one.”

make their own decisions not just follow their own, sometimes limited experience.

“It (parent education) builds on the skills and strengths, and enhances and acknowledges them. It builds on parents ability to provide better for their kids.”

Illawarra

“Parents are children’s first and most important educators. Parents have great ideas and are in touch with their children.”

Enfield

Parent education and playgroups can be soft-entry points for further assistance. Once they had established a relationship with them, workers often took the opportunity to link parents and children into other services or agencies. These may have been other services offered by that agency, or by different agencies. One example involved a triple-pronged, continuum approach that was preventative and looked at parents’ needs holistically:

- Ante natal classes to give young women connections to other services that could help them in the future.
- A parenting group to provide them access to a child health nurse.
- An anxiety and stress group to help them to deal with these issues, and make it easier to cope with their toddler’s behaviour.

The involvement of community health nurses in programs has resulted in them seeing families they do not normally see, providing information and advice informally on play, parenting and health issues.

In some of the communities there are few public meeting places where parents can sit and talk together, develop connections, and learn from each other. The venues and social opportunities provided by Stronger

Families Fund projects in these communities were essential in enabling people to get together.

“In some communities there are no social meeting places like cafes or milk bars – playgroup is the only place where people can sit and talk together outside of their homes.”

Launceston

Once people started to get together, other things started to happen. Running courses and groups often seeded social networks, as people met others in the same situation. Individuals meeting as groups and then meeting as larger groups in different places had an important effect on communities.

“It puts a buzz on the estate – ‘nice noise’. It also builds the profile of the estate so it is not seen as being a bad, dark and dingy place.”

Illawarra

“Working with parents and increasing their skills and capacities has a flow on effect, enhancing the skills and capacities of children. When families are better off, communities are better off.”

Peterborough

Two very different projects took their playgroup to the community – one to remote communities and to parks, and one to the streets of an estate, in order to maximise participation of parents and children.

“We were hoping for a pied piper effect, planned to start in one street and move from week to week and people follow. It worked.”

Illawarra

Project workers identified playgroups as an avenue to encourage the development of children through play, and to increase the knowledge that parents have about play. For example, the primary school in Launceston noticed

that when the children who participated in the playgroup came to school they appreciated books, and were more advanced in drawing with pencils and pens.

Conclusion

In spite of the very different approaches being taken to parent education and playgroups, there were commonly shared views about how to develop effective work in this area. Interestingly these commonalities had to do with the process of developing and running parent education and playgroups, rather than with the specific content of any one program. The diversity of the programs and activities being delivered is indicative of the work being responsive to community needs and interests.

A social setting focusing on delivering activities or programs with groups of parents and children had many beneficial effects – it provided a social meeting place in communities where this might not exist; it normalised the difficulties experienced by parents; and it provided social support and reduced the isolation of parents and therefore of their children. Being together also allowed parents to support one another and to recognise their own expertise.

Workers interviewed were strongly committed to making a difference for children and families and, with one exception, to being led by the community about what was needed and how this should be delivered. There was an understanding and recognition that parenting is complex and that parents need support. However, the structure and type of support needs to be driven by parents to be most effective.

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