Childcare and children's health

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Navigating common pitfalls in parenting conversations – developing the partnership

Parents using early childhood services, and the early childhood professionals working in those services, share a major driving interest and motivation – the happiness and wellbeing of the children. Parental involvement and effective parent-carer partnerships are crucial in providing high quality care to children. The benefits of these partnerships can extend beyond service improvement to making a real difference in the day to day life of families who use early childhood services. By providing support, information and advice on child development and parenting, early childhood services can play an important role in supporting parents in the task of raising children. However, communication with parents can be a minefield for the unwary. Understanding the context when parents seek help and adopting a genuinely collaborative approach to working with parents provides a foundation for providing successful support.

Importance of working with parents

It is now widely recognized that a child should be seen as part of a package – a family package that centers around a relationship between the child and his or her primary caregiver/s. Research has confirmed that child health, welfare or educational outcomes can be enhanced when services effectively engage parents. These insights have driven a range of developments that have led to greater parental involvement in services and improved programs as a result. Involving parents can produce better service outcomes.

Recognised also, but to a lesser extent, is the enormous potential of children's services in supporting parents in the task of rearing their children. As the first port of call for many parents of young children, early childhood services can be an important source of encouragement, advice and information about how to manage the day to day challenges of caring for young children. Support of this kind provided in a timely and effective manner can help nip early behavioural and social problems in the bud and prevent difficulties from evolving into problems requiring more intensive programs delivered by specialists. Positive encounters between carers and parents can also make an enormous difference as to whether a parent goes on to seek help from other family or community services.

On the other hand negative encounters with parents can be a major source of stress for carers. Many carers freely admit that dealing with children is much easier than dealing with their parents. This is understandable, given that for professionals in children' services their natural priority and their training focuses on interactions with children, and many are poorly prepared in their training to work with the children's parents. Skills in communicating and interacting with parents can make the workplace more enjoyable and less stressful.

Context of discussions about parenting

It is hard for parents to seek help in our society. We know from an Australian survey that 25% of parents reported a concern about their child's behaviour, yet only one third of those had sought professional help (Sanders et al., 1999). Parenting education is growing but is still not well accepted in this country as there is still sometimes a stigma attached to parenting programs and parenting support. Many parents stay away from parenting education classes believing that these programs are for 'bad' parents. However the evidence shows that participation in such programs can have a very positive effect on parenting skills and satisfaction.

Discussions about parenting can be a minefield for the unwary professional. Few topics are more sensitive. They can be challenging for the following reasons:

- *Anticipate blame* – Many parents anticipate being blamed for their children's problems. Parents today live in a social context that is extremely judgmental. Our society is quick to blame parents for the misfortunes experienced by children. Problems in a child's behaviour or development are seen as evidence of parental incompetence. The popular media is full of stories that adopt a negative standpoint on parents. Unfortunately, parents have also come to expect that the very professionals who have the responsibility for supporting them may ultimately also blame them for difficulties they encounter in their parenting. Anticipating this, many parents delay seeking help, hoping the problems will resolve themselves (Webster-Stratton and Herbert, 1994). By the time many parents do seek help, they are often feeling isolated and discouraged.
- *Double bind* – For some parents, a concern about their child has two equally unpalatable explanations: either there is something wrong with their child, or there is something wrong with them. Understanding this double bind can help prevent blocks and obstacles arising in your interactions with parents. Anxiety can be provoked depending on the approach of the professional. For example, making an observation that a child "may not be socially ready..." can trigger a defensive reaction from a parent trying to deal with the worry that such a statement can cause. Or if a professional says to a parent, "Have you tried this..." there is an implication that the problem is the way the parent handles the issue. A parent sensing the implicit criticism, and naturally defending their own sense of wellbeing, may become defensive and try harder to convince the practitioner that there is something about the child or the situation that is at fault rather than their parenting (Madsen, 1999).
- *Emotional vulnerability* – Parents are emotionally at their most vulnerable when it comes to their children. Parents are hard wired to want the best for their children. They have to manage high levels of anxiety when confronted with actual or perceived threats to their child's health and wellbeing. They have highly developed 'threat detectors' as well. This is why even seemingly innocent comments from carers can raise strong reactions from parents if there are insinuations that are critical of the child, such as an inference that their child may be delayed, or may be at fault for something. Professionals who have many children in their care can easily lose sight of this fact and enter casual conversations with parents about things that have enormous implications for parental sense of wellbeing.

Cultivating collaborative relationships

The way through this potential mine field is to adopt a collaborative approach to the work you do with parents. The hallmark of a collaborative approach is a genuine partnership between early childhood professionals and parents. A useful way to understand the nature of a collaborative approach is to contrast it with a more traditional 'expert' based model once so prevalent in health and community services. The table on the next page compares a range of attitudes and behaviours between an expert and collaborative model of working with parents.

Conclusion

The ways in which early childhood professionals think about how to develop and maintain a partnership with parents, and the assumptions they make about parenting and parenting difficulties, are crucial to successfully navigating some of the challenges in conversations with parents.

QIAS Quality Area 2, Principles 1.4, 3.1, 7.1
FDCQA Quality Area 1, Principles 3.1, 3.2, 6.4

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References

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Sanders, M., Tully, L., Baade, P., Lynch, M., Heywood, A., Pollard, G., and Youlden, D. (1999) 'A survey of parenting practices in Queensland: *Implications for mental health promotion.'* Health Promotion Journal of Australia 9(2): 105-114.

Webster-Stratton, C., and Herbert, M. (1994) Troubled Families – Problem Children: Working with Families: *A Collaborative Process.* Chichester, England: John Wiley and Sons.

The professional working from an 'Expert' model:	The professional working from a 'Collaborative' model:
Sees themselves as the expert and the parents as the passive recipient of expert advice	Recognises that parents bring real expertise about the child, the situation and their assessment of what would work best in their family. Believes that the best outcomes are achieved when the knowledge and skills of parents and professional are shared.
Believes there is a right way to parent	Believes that there are many different ways of achieving the same positive results. The 'right' way is the approach that meets the child's needs and fits best with the family's values and goals.
Views child's misbehaviour as evidence of parental incompetence	Understands that the causes of child behaviour problems are multifaceted and often involve factors that are beyond the parents' control (e.g., child's temperament, disability, social and family factors). Firmly believes that whilst the parents are not to blame, they are always part of the solution.
Expert at identifying deficits and weaknesses	Works collaboratively with families and able to identify strengths and resources that could be used to resolve situations. Applies a solution focused process, investing effort in helping to find solutions rather than getting bogged down in analyzing the problem.
Assumes they need to solve the problem because of a deficit in the parents' problem solving ability	Respects the problem solving capacity of the parent and endeavors to empower the parent further through suggestions, resources and strategies aimed at achieving realistic goals for their child.
Tells the parents what to do	Avoids dogmatic positions, and is careful about the advice that is given. Acts as a resource for the parents, sharing information, ideas and knowledge, but letting the parents decide what they will do with it.
Impatient with lack of change and progress and attributes lack of progress to the parents' lack of motivation, effort or consistency	Understands how much adult behaviour change is required in implementing the simplest parenting strategy, and how hard and uncomfortable it can be to change your own behaviour. Continues to convey optimism in the parents' capacity to change and succeed.
Does most of the talking whilst parents do most of the listening. Parents' role in the interaction is passive.	The professional does more listening than talking, particularly in the early stages of a conversation with a parent. Parent's ideas and contributions are actively sought. Parents strongly influence the focus and pace of any work done together.
Imposes values and beliefs on the parents and judges them against their own standards (e.g. 'families should eat their family meal together')	Respects the parents' values and beliefs. Refrains from giving personal views and respectfully offers ideas and strategies that parents can use in achieving their own goals.
Is defensive and guarded when parents question them	Encourages parents to voice reservations, doubts or concerns, and to express their feelings. Does not take parents' questions personally.
Likely to attribute negative parental behaviour to character flaws in the parents	Looks for the positive intentions behind parent actions. Believes that parents want what is best for the child even when they appear stuck in self-defeating behaviour.
Makes assumptions about the parents' experiences	Seeking to understand the parenting experience from the parents' point of view becomes the foremost concern. Does not rely on own experience as a parent; it may be very different (different child, different context, different levels of support).

Available resources on parent-professional partnerships

The following two books have been specifically developed for family day care and centre based child care. These are the result of a project undertaken by the Centre for Community Child Health and funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

The Cornerstones of Quality in Family Day Care and Child Care Centres – Parent-Professional Partnerships

A practical and relevant resource to support continuous improvement in parent-professional partnerships.

The Heart of Partnerships in Family Day Care – Carer-Parent Communication

A resource to support reflection on the ways carers communicate with parents, raise awareness of "value-added" communication, and highlight the importance of communication about the child as part of quality care.

These publications are available to download from our website **www.ecconnections.com.au**

New Parenting Website Initiative

The Centre for Community Child Health, the Victorian Parenting Centre and Smart Population Foundation came together to form Raising Children Network (RCN) and won the tender to build a national website for parenting information. RCN brings an internationally respected scientific and research base together with expertise in multi-media, and many years combined experience in early years service delivery. The Raising Children Website is supported by the Australian Government under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

The Raising Children Website will make the latest science in child health and development broadly accessible, empowering parents and carers to make informed choices for children. The website seeks to engage and support parents and carers of children through empowering language and innovative interactive services.

For further information:

Visit us at **www.raisingchildren.net.au** to join the RCN email list, sign up to test-drive the proto-site in February, and find out more about the development of the website through the online newsletters.

The Parent Fact Sheet accompanying this newsletter is available in different community languages and can be downloaded for printing from the Early Childhood Connections website. **www.ecconnections.com.au**

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