Submission to the National Children's Commissioner

Young Parents and Parenting Support

May 2017

Murdoch Childrens Research Institute

Parenting Research Centre
raising children well

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1.   Executive summary

The Parenting Research Centre and the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute have developed this submission in response to an invitation from the National Children's Commissioner. The focus of this submission is improving outcomes for young parents (15-24 years) and their children through parenting support.

Our main argument in this submission is that in order achieve improved outcomes for young parents and their children we need effective, accessible parenting support. In our submission we summarise we know about parenting and parenting support, and the implications of this for young parents. We review the core components of effective parenting support, and conclude with our recommendations for early interventions targeting young parents.

Parenting

Parenting is the task of raising and nurturing children. This task is performed by a child's primary caregiver/s. It is the relationship the caregiver/s form with their children, together with what they do in the daily process of child-rearing that we define as 'parenting.'

Parenting is a set of skills that are learned on the job, and it has a profound influence upon child outcomes. Parenting that influences child outcomes in a positive way is underpinned by several universal parenting qualities, such as warmth and responsiveness. These qualities can be expressed in a range of ways, and can buffer children from the negative effects of disadvantage.

Young parents, for example, may have unique ways of expressing parenting qualities such as warmth, however what matters most is whether their parenting is effective. Furthermore, because children of young parents often grow up in disadvantaged circumstances, the universal parenting qualities that buffer children from the effects of disadvantage are especially important.

Parenting support

Parenting support aims to improve children's outcomes by influencing the nature and quality of parent-child interactions and relationships. Some parents will get the parenting support they need from family and friends; others may need formal, professional support.

Parenting support takes multiple forms including: group parenting programs; peer-to-peer support; and IT-based support. Parenting support should draw on the best available evidence, and a range of supports need to be available. Young parents need support that caters especially to young people.

Parenting support should be founded upon collaborative relationships, and the goal should be capacity building. Through parenting support, parents should get the parenting skills they need, become more empowered, confident and autonomous. This is especially important for young parents, who commonly report feeling stigmatised and judged.

Policies and infrastructure can facilitate effective parenting. For example, a policy that encourages school retention among young parents and young parents-to-be and provides school-based parenting skills programs has the potential to facilitate effective parenting.

Essential core principles of effective parenting support

Effective parenting support is underpinned by ten core principles:

- **A progressive universalism approach** which means: providing a continuum of services, whereby universal services are the platform for additional services; and additional services proportionate to the level of need

- **Support across the life course of the child** (including adolescence)
- **Evidence-based approaches**
- **Ongoing research and evaluation**
- **Focus on outcomes for the child** because parenting support is only a means to an end.
- **Non-judgemental approach** because it will enhance parent engagement
- **Focus upon function rather than form**, for example, the function of that eating together at dinner time is to bring a family together to facilitate conversation and shared experiences
- **Work in partnership with parents**; share expertise and decision-making processes.
- **A strengths-based approach**; focus on building strengths as the foundation for change.
- **Focus on behaviour change** when risks are present.

Conclusions

We can reduce the risk profile of young parents and their children by providing them with effective, accessible forms of support that: is based upon the best available empirical evidence; is delivered in a way that facilitates engagement; and reflects young parents' needs and preferences.

Recommendations

We recommend that early interventions targeting young parents:

1. Are **evidence-based** in terms of what is delivered; how it is delivered; and client values and preferences.
2. **Are not limited to evidence-based programs** but incorporate a range of supports
3. **Maximise the potential of digital technologies**
4. **Are embedded within a platform of universal support**
5. **Encourage the active and meaningful participation** of young parents
6. **Challenge negative stereotypes and judgements** of young parents
7. **Facilitate informal support networks** among young parents
8. **Incorporate specialist training and support for service providers** to enhance their capacity to respond to the needs of young parents
9. **Are evaluated** to determine what works and what doesn't work for young parents.

We recommend that parenting support interventions targeting young parents:

10. Aim to enhance parenting skills by **building young parents' sense of empowerment, parenting confidence and autonomy**.
11. **Emphasise to young parents that parenting is a learned skill** that anyone can learn
12. **Support young parents' capacity for warm and responsive parenting**
13. **Allow young parents to express parenting qualities** such as nurturance, warmth and sensitivity **in their own unique way**
14. **Acknowledge young parents' parenting strengths**
15. **Are available prenatally**

2.   Early interventions for young parents

2.1.   Introduction

The Parenting Research Centre and the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute greatly appreciate the invitation to contribute to the National Children's Commissioner 2017 Roundtable. We are contributing to this Roundtable jointly, as independent, not-for-profit research organisations.

We understand that the focus of the roundtable is young parents, young parents-to-be and their children.[1] In keeping with the definition used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, we define young parents as parents or guardians aged 15-24 years old (ABS, 2012).

The fertility rates of young parents in Australia have been declining consistently for the past 40 years (ABS, 2011). However, young parents within some subgroups in the Australian population have higher fertility rates than others. For example, in 2008:

- the birth rate among Indigenous teenagers was more than five times the birth rate among non-Indigenous teenagers; and

- the birth rate among teenagers living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas of Australia was almost seven times the birth rate among teenagers living in the areas of least disadvantage (AIHW, 2011).

Young parents - especially teenage parents - face a range of challenges. Teenage mothers have a higher risk of pregnancy complications, and teenager parents are more likely to be lone parents and live in a disadvantaged area (AIHW, 2011; Price-Robertson, 2010). Young Australian parents also report experiences of negative judgement and stigma within the general community and from service providers (Brand et al, 2015; Larkins, 2009; McArthur & Barry, 2013).

Due to the challenges faced by their parents, the children of young parents are also at risk of poor outcomes including pre-term birth, low birthweight and associated complications. The children of teenage parents are also more likely than their peers to develop behavioural problems and grow up in socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances (AIHW, 2011).

Because of the specific challenges faced by young parents - and the impact of those challenges upon the children of young parents - we commend the National Children's Commissioner's focus upon this group. Exploring ways to better support young parents in their parenting role has the potential to bring about better outcomes for them and their children.

The importance of this endeavour is heightened by the fact that some groups that are already disadvantaged within our population (e.g. Indigenous Australians, young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas) have higher teenage birth rates than other less disadvantaged groups (AIHW, 2011). Supporting young parents who are already disadvantaged would appear to be especially worthwhile considering the benefits that support will have for future generations (Azzopardi, 2016).

Our submission

We understand the National Children's Commissioner is interested in three key issues pertaining to young parents - that is, the type of early interventions:

1.   likely to decrease the risk profile and trajectory of young parents, young parents to be and their children;

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[1] For the sake of brevity in this document the term 'young parents' incorporates young parents-to-be, unless otherwise specified.

2. which improve young parents' capacity for safe and effective parenting; and

3. which increase their likelihood of becoming economically secure.

Essentially, all three of these issues are concerned with improving outcomes for young parents and their children.

We believe that improving outcomes for parents and children requires three basic forms of support:

- **Parent support** which aims to enhance adult (parent) wellbeing;

- **Parenting support** which aims to improve children's outcomes by influencing the nature and quality of parent-child interactions and relationships; and

- **Child support** which aims to enhance child wellbeing.

All three forms of support are important aspects of a comprehensive family support strategy. However, although parenting has a profound impact on child development, parenting support is often overlooked when considering how to improve child outcomes (Michaux & McDonald, 2015).

The other aspect of interest to the National Children's Commissioner is early intervention for young parents and their children. We define early interventions as those that occur either early in the life of the child (from pregnancy through to 5 years of age) or early in the 'life' of a problem (i.e. before the problem has a chance to escalate or become entrenched). Early interventions reduce the potential for, or the impact of, risk factors to child development.

We have chosen not to focus upon the third question of interest to the National Children's Commissioner, which concerns economic security, as this does not align with our organisational expertise.

Given these facts**, in this submission we address the first two questions** of interest to the National Children's Commissioner **by focusing upon early interventions that deliver parenting support with the aim of improving outcomes for young parents and their children**.

Our main argument is that a fundamental component of any initiative that seeks to achieve improved outcomes for young parents and their children is effective, accessible parenting support. We also argue that parenting support underpinned by the core principles outlined in this submission is the key to long-term, sustainable and widespread improvements in child, parent and family outcomes in Australia. Given their vulnerability, this type of parenting support is especially important to young parents and their children.

The following submission comprises four sections:

1. **What we know about parenting** based upon current evidence. We highlight the implications of this knowledge for young parents and their children.

2. **What we know about parenting support** based upon current evidence. We highlight the implications of what we know about parenting support for young parents and their children.

3. The **essential core principles of** accessible, effective **parenting support**. We highlight why these core principles are especially important to young parents and their children.

4. We conclude with our **recommendations** for intervening early to:

   a. **decrease the risk profile of young parents** and young parents to be;

   b. **decrease the risk profile of the children of young parents**; and

   c. **improve young parents' capacity for safe and effective parenting**.

Throughout this submission, we include case studies of projects and initiatives undertaken by the Raising Children Network and its two consortium partners, the Parenting Research Centre and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, which highlight and reinforce our key arguments.

2.2. What we know about parenting

Parenting is the task of raising and nurturing children. This task is performed by a child's primary caregiver/s, who may or may not be the child's biological parent/s. It is the relationship that primary carers form with their children, together with what they do in the daily process of child-rearing that we define as 'parenting.'

The key points below are based on current evidence and summarise what we know about parenting. Following these key points, we highlight the implications of this knowledge about parenting for young parents and their children.

- **Parenting has an impact on every aspect of child development** including physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.

- **Certain parenting qualities are universally important to children's wellbeing**. These qualities of nurturance, warmth, sensitivity, responsiveness and flexibility can be expressed in a range of ways.

- **Warm and responsive parenting can buffer children from the negative effects of social adversity**. Although social and personal adversity can make it difficult to parent effectively, ultimately it is the extent to which the quality of parenting is impaired, and not these factors alone, that determines children's outcomes.

- **Children influence how they are parented**. Parenting is a two-way street: parenting impacts upon children, and children influence how they are parented.

- **There is no such thing as a 'perfect' parent, but there is such a thing as effective parenting**. Effective parenting meets the physical, cognitive and emotional needs of children. It stimulates and nurtures children so they develop the capacities to become skilled, self-reliant, empathic individuals who relate well to others. These core functions of parenting are universally important.

- **There is no single 'right' way of parenting**. Rather, effective parenting is dynamic and adaptive, sensitive to a child's stage of development and surrounding culture and context.

- **It's not who parents are but what they do that matters**. Factors such as the age, gender and sexual orientation of a parent, or whether they are biologically related to a child, do not determine parenting capacity.

- **Parenting requires a set of skills**. Parenting skills are learned and learnable and, as such, can be practiced and improved upon.

- **Parenting is learned on the job**. It is impossible to fully prepare a person for parenting before they have children.

Implications for young parents and their children

The key points listed above are relevant to all parents, regardless of age. However there are some specific implications for young parents and their children.

- **Young parents**, especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, **may have unique ways of expressing parenting qualities** such as nurturance, warmth, sensitivity, responsiveness and flexibility. However, there is no single 'right' way of parenting. What matters is whether the parenting is effective.

- Although the children of young parents are more likely than their peers to experience social disadvantage, **warm and responsive parenting can buffer the children of young parents from the negative effects of disadvantage** (O'Connor, 2002; Zubrick et al, 2008).

- **It's not who young parents are but what they do as parents that matters to their child's outcomes**. Nevertheless, many young parents report experiences of stigma, negative judgement and even hostility when they interact with health and community services (Brand et al, 2015; Larkins, 2009; McArthur & Barry, 2013). This potentially undermines the opportunity for early intervention, as young parents may be reluctant to approach services until they have reached crisis point.

- Because parenting is learned on the job, **young parents need access to parenting support before and after their child is born**.

- **Young parents** - like all parents - **can learn the skills associated with effective parenting**.

2.3. What we know about parenting support

All parents - including young parents - need support as their child grows and develops. Parenting support aims to improve children's outcomes by influencing the nature and quality of parent-child interactions and relationships.

The key points below are based on current evidence and summarise what we know about parenting support. Following these key points, we highlight the implications of this knowledge about parenting support for young parents, young parents to be and their children.

- **Parenting support is different from parent support**. Parent support aims to improve children's outcomes by enhancing adult wellbeing. Parenting support aims to improve children's outcomes by influencing the nature and quality of parent-child interactions and relationships.

- **Both parenting support and parent support are important** components of a comprehensive strategy to support families.

- **Some parents will get the parenting support they need from informal networks**, such as family and friends. **Others may need**, or prefer, **formal, professional support**.

- **Parenting support takes multiple forms** including:
  - formal group parenting education programs;
  - the peer-to-peer support that occurs in playgroups or parent groups; and
  - information technology-based support such as online therapy, interactive websites, text messaging, smartphone apps (see Case Studies 1 and 2 below).

Case study 1

Raising Children Network: Online, accessible parenting support

Raising Children Network, one of PRC's and MCRI's flagship and longest-running initiatives, is an internationally award-winning parenting portal providing a comprehensive range of high-quality, scientifically validated videos, apps and articles on health, learning, development and behaviour from pregnancy and infancy through to the late teens.

Raising Children Network translates science and research into understandable and useable 'bites' of information for parents and professionals. Its content includes an emphasis on prevention and early intervention communicated via multimodal, shareable information, and is developed and reviewed in close collaboration with experts.

Now in its 10th year of operation, raisingchildren.net.au is accessed by 40,000 parents and professionals every day. Over 14.7 million people visited raisingchildren.net.au in the past year, reading approximately 25 million pages. It has approximately 165,000 Facebook followers and 30 online discussion forums.

Raising Children Network works with a network of 400+ experts to translate scientific information into plain-language resources. These networks span an extensive range of areas related to children and young people's social, emotional and physical health, development and learning. Its content is embedded into child health records in several jurisdictions across Australia and championed by child and family health nurses, paediatricians and GPs, early childhood service providers and disability organisations.

- **Some parents will benefit from long-term intensive forms of parenting support** because of their life circumstances and/or the needs of their children.

- **A range of formal parenting supports need to be available and easily accessible to all parents** to cater to parents different needs, preferences, values and beliefs.

Case study 2

Information technology-based support for parents

Key findings from an assessment of information technology-based support for parents (e.g. online therapy, interactive websites, text messaging, smartphone apps) indicate that:

- there is growing evidence that information technology can be used to improve a wide range of parent and child outcomes

- most information technology delivery modes appear to be acceptable to parents

- the effectiveness of information technology-based interventions is wholly dependent on the effectiveness of the underlying approach (i.e. technology is merely a delivery mode; the underlying content of an intervention needs to be effective)

- web-based, self-directed support and education is useful for improving parenting skills, parent behaviour and parent outcomes

- online therapies and online parenting programs are associated with improved outcomes and may be comparable to face-to-face modes

- the clearest benefits for online therapies, parenting programs, and web-based learning were seen when offline support (e.g. therapy sessions) is also provided

- simple interventions appear to work well for simple outcomes (for example text messages for reminders and prompts) but may be less useful for more complex behaviour change

- information technology-based interventions are in use with a range of hard-to-reach parenting populations, particularly with low-income families (Sartore et al, 2016).

- **The goal of parenting support should be capacity building**. Through parenting support, parents should get the parenting skills they need, become more empowered, confident and autonomous, and capable of dealing with future challenges.

- **Parenting support should draw on the best available evidence**. This evidence should be used to provide the most effective and beneficial support to parents.

- **Effective parenting support is built on collaborative relationships**. Collaborative relationships start from a position of respect for family values and beliefs. Within collaborative relationships, professionals treat parents as experts on their children and acknowledge existing family strengths and parents are actively and meaningfully involved in every aspect of the support they receive.

Case study 3

The importance of process: Engaging vulnerable and at-risk families

Collaborative and strengths-based approaches are not simply a 'feel-good' aspect of service delivery. Research demonstrates that how an intervention is delivered (also referred to as the process of service delivery) is just as important as what intervention is delivered.

When parents feel respected by service providers, and when they feel empowered through strengths-based practice, it helps to build relationships of trust with service providers. When those relationships of trust exist, parents are more willing to participate meaningfully in an intervention (i.e. attend sessions, actively participate in sessions, and come back to subsequent sessions).

Research demonstrates that qualities of trust and respect are especially important for engaging vulnerable and at-risk families. This is because the qualities that make families vulnerable and at-risk (lack of trust, limited confidence) also function as obstacles to help-seeking and obtaining support.

For more information on the importance of process for engaging vulnerable and at-risk families see Moore et al (2012)

- **Policies and infrastructure can facilitate effective parenting**. Workplace and education policies, for example, can provide parents and children with opportunities to spend high-quality time together.

- **The role of government is** not to tell parents how to raise their children, but **to provide the infrastructure to support parents in their parenting role**.

Implications for young parents and their children

The implications for young parents of these key points about parenting support are as follows.

- Social isolation is a common issue for young parents in Australia (reference). This suggests that **young parents in general may need more support than other parents to build informal support networks** and, in the short-term at least, may require more formal, professional support than older parents (i.e. because of higher rates of social isolation).

- Young parents may have needs, preferences, values and beliefs that are different to older parents. For this reason, **it is important that young parents have access to a range of supports**, including support that caters especially to young people.

- Because young parents commonly report feeling stigmatised and judged in the general population and in some service settings, it is especially important that:

  - **any parenting support young parents receive focuses on enhancing their sense of empowerment, confidence, autonomy and resilience**; and

  - service providers:

    - **start from a position of respect** for the values and beliefs of young parents and their families;

    - **treat young parents as experts on their children**;

    - **acknowledge young parents'** parenting **strengths**; and

    - **encourage the active and meaningful involvement of young parents** in every aspect of the support they receive.

- **Policies that facilitate effective parenting will benefit the children of young parents**. Furthermore, policies that facilitate effective parenting at the same time as improving outcomes for young parents will benefit young parents and their children. For example, a policy that encourages school retention among young parents and young parents-to-be and provides school-based parenting skills programs has the potential to facilitate effective parenting and improve young parents' social and educational outcomes.

- **What young parents need from government is the infrastructure to support them in their parenting role**. This infrastructure could include, for example, child-care facilities within secondary schools to cater for young parents who are completing their education.

2.4. Essential core principles of parenting support

The combined expertise of our two organisations - which is founded upon decades of research undertaken in Australia - indicates that effective parenting support relies upon 10 core principles:

Use a progressive universalism approach

Many parents need support with parenting (Moran et al, 2004). Therefore it is important that all parents who need parenting support can get it. However, the needs of parents differ; some parents require more intensive support than others.

Progressive universalism is a model of service delivery that reflects the diversity of parenting needs. According to this model:

- there is a continuum of services (i.e. 'seamless' service delivery), as opposed to distinct levels of service;

- universal services (i.e. available to everyone) are the platform for additional services; and

- additional services are provided at a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of need.

Two key benefits of progressive universalism are, firstly, that if services are available to everyone (i.e. the universal component), the use of those services is 'normalised' (Family and Parenting Institute, 2011). Secondly, the flexible system of service provision reflects the reality of socio-economic disadvantage in Australia; many families move in and out of disadvantage over time (Mullan & Higgins, 2014).

Provide support across the life course of the child

Early childhood experiences are important, but so are those of the middle years and adolescence. The availability of support throughout a child's life span – including during adolescence – makes a difference to their long-term outcomes.

Use evidence-based approaches

Evidence-based approaches are those that have been proven to be effective. In the context of finite resources – and considering the potential for harm from ineffective interventions – it is important that all forms of parenting support, including the support provided to young parents, are informed by the best available evidence.

Undertake ongoing research and evaluation of parenting support

There is a lot that is still unknown about parenting support (Moran et al, 2004). We need to know more about what forms of parenting support works best for young people, and under what circumstances. There is a lack of evidence, for example, regarding which interventions are effective among teenage mothers (McDermott & Graham, 2006). Ongoing research and evaluation of policies and services is critical to ensuring high quality and effective parenting support.

Focus on outcomes for the child

The focus of parenting support policy and service delivery should always be the outcomes for the child. Parenting support is a means to an end – that end being positive outcomes for children.

Use a non-judgemental approach

Negative judgements of parenting are unlikely to lead to a change in parent behaviour. Criticisms of parenting styles and techniques are not helpful, and may even prevent parents from acting on information or advice and/or asking for help.

This principle is especially relevant to young parents. Some young parents report experiences of negative judgement, stigma, and even hostility, when interacting with health and community services in Australia (Brand et al, 2015; Larkins, 2009; McArthur & Barry, 2013). This may discourage young parents from approaching services when they are experiencing a problem.

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Case study 4

Raising Children Network: A non-judgemental approach to parenting

A non-judgemental approach to parenting is at the core of the Raising Children Network. This is evident in the emphasis given to tone and voice. Our tone is calm, friendly, positive and factual. Our voice is empathetic, but not judgemental; upbeat but not unrealistic; supportive but not overbearing; informative but not didactic.

This non-judgemental approach is also evident in the way information is presented on raisingchildren.net.au. Evidence-based parenting methods and options are described and explained, and parents are invited parents to select their next course of action. Where there is evidence for more than one approach, raisingchildren.net.au lets parents know about the different approaches, and highlights the risks and benefits associated with each one.

By presenting information in this way, raisingchildren.net.au aims to clarify options and empower parents, rather than criticising or passing judgement on specific parenting styles or techniques. By providing parents with options and inviting them to select their next course of action, raisingchildren.net.au also respects parents' expertise on their own circumstances; parents themselves can choose which course of action best suits their child's and family's needs.

An example of this approach is the raisingchildren.net.au Behaviour Toolkits. Behaviour Toolkits cater to specific developmental stages (e.g. toddler, pre-schooler, school-aged), and each Toolkit provides a range of behaviour management strategies. All the behaviour management options are based on reliable research evidence and parents are encouraged to try different options so they can work out what best suits their family circumstances.

Behaviour Toolkits are available at:

http://raisingchildren.net.au/behaviour_toolkit/behaviour_toolkit_toddlers.html

http://raisingchildren.net.au/behaviour_toolkit/behaviour_toolkit_preschoolers.html

http://raisingchildren.net.au/behaviour_toolkit/behaviour_toolkit_school_age.html

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Focus upon function rather than form

The function of parenting behaviour is more important than the form. Eating together at dinner time is an oft-cited example of a positive family practice. However, it is the function of that behaviour – bringing a family together to facilitate conversation and shared experiences – that is important. The form – that is, sitting at the table and sharing dinner – is less important. Parenting support needs to focus upon function, as opposed to form.

Work in partnership with parents

Working in partnership with parents involves parents and service providers working together, sharing expertise and decision-making processes. Partnership approaches are characterised by mutual trust, respect and responsibility (Davis & Day, 2010). Partnership approaches are especially important when service providers are working directly with vulnerable families – such as young parents (Moore et al, 2012).

Case study 5

Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities: Working in partnership

Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities (EPEC) is a community-based program that trains parents to run parenting groups. Parent facilitators in the EPEC program are employed, supported and supervised by a specially trained practitioner within a local community organisation.

Developed and tested by the UK Centre for Parent and Child Support, EPEC provides an alternative model to practitioner-led parenting interventions. The basic course for all parents, with children aged 2-12, known as "Being a Parent", involves 8 x 2.5 hour sessions. These sessions are delivered according to a structured manual which is informed by attachment, social learning, structural, relational and cognitive behavioural theory.

Because EPEC is facilitated by parents it requires practitioners, and services, to embrace a culture of practice that includes parents as co-workers, co-reflectors and co-learners in partnership with professional workers. The dynamic of local parents working within the system, alongside practitioners, helps to bridge the gap between services and families disengaged from the system. The active involvement of parent facilitators in EPEC gives credibility to the system in the eyes of families that have previously found services difficult to access.

Peer led parenting interventions are uncommon in the Australian context. However, a recent evaluation of EPEC in Tasmania demonstrated their benefits of this model. Parents who completed the Being a Parent Course reported better listening and more thinking in their dealings with children, a more optimistic outlook on life, and improved parent-child relations. Parents who continued to the next level of training reported increased confidence, optimism, educational and employment pathways, and improved ability to manage the challenges of daily life (Winter, 2013).

For more information see:

http://www.rch.org.au/ccch/research-projects/Empowering_Parents_Empowering_Communities/

Case study 6

Raising Children Network: Working with parents to shape and develop content

raisingchildren.net.au views parents as beneficiaries and as partners in the development of resources. This position informs the work of Raising Children Network in three key ways:

• Parent feedback and input is incorporated into resources, and used to shape and scope content.

• 'Crowd-sourced' parent and carer input is sought out through a range of channels, including social media and parenting forums and events.

• Resources are co-designed with parents. For example, fathers were involved in the co-development of a Dad's Guide to Pregnancy (see http://raisingchildren.net.au/dads_guide_pregnancy/dads_guide_to_pregnancy.html)

Use a strengths-based approach

A strengths-based approach focuses on strengths, as opposed to weaknesses, and aims to utilise and build upon those strengths as the foundation for change. Focusing upon possibilities rather than problems, the self-defined aspirations of the individual (or group) and available resources within the individual's own life (e.g. family, community), a strengths-based approach is especially useful when working with vulnerable families who may be reluctant to ask for help as a result of previous 'deficit-based' encounters with service providers (Saleeby, 1996).

Similarly to the principle of 'working in partnership', embedding this principle in practice will depend upon the capacity of the professionals who provide parenting support to work in a strength-based way.

Case study 7

Family partnership model: A strengths-based approach

The Family Partnership Model (FPM) is an evidence-based approach to working with families that involves:

- building parents' capacity to utilise their own resources and establish methods for adapting to and managing problems in the long-term;

- engaging parents and developing a relationship with them that is supportive in and of itself; and

- understanding families in a holistic way (Davis et al, 2002, p. ix-x).

At the heart of the FPM is a partnership between professionals and families characterised by shared expertise and active collaboration to achieve shared, meaningful outcomes (Fowler et al, 2012). As such, the FPM contrasts with 'expert' models of working with families that are based upon a deficit view of families and which may ignore the strengths, capabilities and context-specific knowledge of parents (Davis & Meltzer, 2007; Rossiter et al, 2011).

The FPM has a distinct structure comprising three core aspects:

1. a staged helping process that involves identifying parents' goals, exploring strategies, evaluating outcomes and joint decision-making on further steps;

2. helper qualities, skills and behaviours which enable collaborative and respectful interactions (e.g. humility, personal integrity); and

3. the theoretical basis for understanding parenting and parent-child relationships (Rossiter et al, 2011).

For more information see:

http://www.rch.org.au/ccch/research-projects/family-partnership/

http://www.cpcs.org.uk/index.php?page=about-family-partnership-model

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Focus on behaviour change

Behaviour change will not be the goal of all parenting support initiatives. In some cases, for example, the goal may be to reassure parents that they are doing a good job and to continue what they are

doing. Where risks are present (i.e. targeted services) or where there is an existing problem (i.e. tertiary services) some form of behaviour change – on behalf of the parent(s) – is typically required.

3.   Conclusions

Parenting is a rewarding but demanding task. The demands of parenting are especially pronounced for young parents. In addition to their parenting responsibilities, young parents are negotiating the opportunities and challenges of adolescence and early adulthood, such as completing their education, moving away from home, and securing employment.

In response to the two questions we have focused upon in this submission:

- We can **reduce the risk profile of young parents and their children** by providing them with effective, accessible forms of support. This support needs to incorporate interventions and approaches designed to: enhance young parents' wellbeing (parent support); enhance their children's wellbeing (child support); and enhance young parents' parenting capacity (parenting support).

- We can **enhance young parents' capacity for safe and effective parenting** by providing parenting support that: is based upon the best available empirical evidence; is delivered in a way that facilitates engagement; and reflects young parents' needs and preferences.

Being a young parent is a risk factor when it comes to child outcomes, but ultimately what matters to children is not how old their parents are, but what their parents do. We can only influence how parents 'do' parenting if we are able to engage them. And we will only engage them if we work in a way that makes them feel hopeful, empowered and confident.

This does not mean delivering exactly what parents ask for, or focusing only on what they're doing well. It means creating an environment where both service providers and parents can identify strengths and challenges, and work together to achieve mutually defined goals. It means creating a foundation for honest, respectful and trusting relationships that help parents feel supported - and not isolated - in their role. This is even more important for young parents, many of whom are 'doubly disadvantaged' by their socio-economic circumstances.

Young parents are just as capable as any other parents of parenting effectively, given they have the right support. The 'right support' includes effective, accessible parenting support - which is what we have described in this submission. We believe that the support we have described here is a critical aspect of sustainable, widespread improvements in outcomes for young Australian parents and their children.

4. Recommendations

We have organised our recommendations according to those that relate to early interventions targeting young parents and those that relate specifically to *parenting support* for young parents.

Recommendations for early interventions targeting young parents

We recommend that early interventions targeting young parents:

1. **Are evidence-based** in terms of:

   - what is delivered (i.e. the content of the intervention);

   - how it is delivered (i.e. evidence-based processes); and

   - client values and preferences.

2. **Are not limited to evidence-based programs but incorporate a range of different forms of support**, such as online information and advice resources, group-based peer support, one-on-one counselling and home visits. A range of different forms of support will ensure the diverse needs and preferences of young people are met.

3. **Maximise the potential of digital technologies** such as smartphone apps, online therapy and interactive websites. Young parents are more likely to be familiar and comfortable with digital technologies and they could be used as a form of early intervention - offering young parents opportunities to access information and support before problems become entrenched.

4. **Are embedded within a platform of universal support** that is welcoming and inclusive of young parents. Ensuring universal supports are welcoming and inclusive of young parents is important because if young parents are engaged with universal services they are more likely to get support for problems before they reach crisis point. Embedding interventions for young parents in a universal platform will also help to ensure that young parents are not isolated from other parents, and can move seamlessly into specialist supports when they need them, and then back into universal services when they are ready.

5. **Encourage the active and meaningful engagement of young parents** because this will help to ensure interventions reflect their values and preferences. It will also encourage young parents to engage in interventions and help to build their sense of empowerment.

6. **Challenge negative stereotypes and judgements of young parents** because these stereotypes reinforce stigmatised views of young parents, and undermine their parenting confidence. Challenging negative stereotypes relates not only to how the content is presented to young parents, but also how it is represented in the wider community (e.g. promotional materials, media releases).

7. **Facilitate informal support networks** among young parents because they are at risk of social isolation, and because informal support networks provide a more sustainable form of support than support provided by formal services.

8. **Incorporate specialist training and support for service providers** (especially universal service providers) to enhance their capacity to respond to the needs of young parents, especially young Indigenous parents and young parents from low SES communities.

9. **Are evaluated** to determine what works and what doesn't work for young parents, especially young Indigenous parents and young parents from low SES communities. The findings of

these evaluations should then be made accessible to all services that have contact with young parents.

Recommendations for parenting support interventions targeting young parents:

We recommend that parenting support interventions targeting young parents:

10. Aim to enhance parenting skills by **building young parents' sense of empowerment, parenting confidence and autonomy**.

11. **Emphasise to young parents that parenting is a learned skill** that anyone can learn, regardless of age or background.

12. **Support young parents' capacity for warm and responsive parenting** because this will help to buffer their children from the negative effects of social adversity that are more common among young parent families.

13. **Allow young parents to express parenting qualities** such as nurturance, warmth and sensitivity **in their own unique way** and according to the norms and expectations of their culture (e.g. Indigenous cultures), remembering that it is function not form that matters to child outcomes.

14. **Acknowledge young parents' parenting strengths** because this will encourage them to engage in interventions, help to build their confidence and ensure that interventions better reflect their needs and preferences.

15. **Are available prenatally, as well as throughout the life-course of the child** because parenting is learned on the job, and parenting challenges can occur at any time over the course of a child's development.

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