

## **WORKFORCE ISSUES AND THE DELIVERY OF 'SOFT ENTRY' SERVICES TO FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN AGED 0-5 YEARS**

There is increasing national interest in integrating child and family service systems and the integrated service delivery that ideally flows from these processes. This draws our attention to the need look more closely at how early childhood professionals work within this new paradigm. This submission discusses workforce issues related to the delivery of 'soft entry' services to families with young children. In particular it focuses on issues relating to the delivery of models that lie outside traditional centre based early childhood provision.

The supported playgroup is one such model. It is used extensively throughout Australia and is funded by state and federal governments within a prevention and early intervention policy framework. Supported playgroups have a dual focus and aim to provide parent support and a quality early childhood learning environment for children aged 0-5 years. As such it is a model that sits across early childhood and human service landscapes.

At their best supported playgroups have the potential to enhance the wellbeing and development of young children, particularly 0-3 year olds, and to provide significant and varied forms of parent support (Jackson, 2010, 2011). The efficacy of the model however is inextricably tied to the way in which the groups are facilitated.

Recent research shows that the roles of facilitators in supported playgroups and models like them, are complex and multidimensional (Jackson, 2010, 2011). Further, facilitators' knowledge and practice related to secure attachment behaviours and responsive parenting is critical when considering the role of these types of models within a child protection framework (Berry, 2008; Jackson, 2010).

Family-centred and inclusive practice literature (Dawson & Berry, 2002; Dunst, 2009; Ghate & Hazel, 2002; Jackson, 2010, 2011; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) shows that the successful engagement of families in models such as supported playgroups can be attributed to the ways in which the facilitators:

- accept families the way they are regardless of circumstance and invite their input into the program;
- use family-friendly strategies that reduce practical and psychological barriers to access;
- combine their technical knowledge with relational and participatory practices to provide family-centred service delivery that is non-judgmental and responsive;
- facilitate flexible access to informal and formal support systems for families;
- have in-depth knowledge of local services systems and utilise a multidisciplinary approach; and
- engage in ongoing professional development and supervision that informs their practice.

With the widespread use of dual focused models in Australia, attention needs to be paid to the workforce issues that arise from this type of service provision, particularly in relation to working with families who experience multiple vulnerabilities. These types of models have the potential to successfully engage a broad and diverse range of families. However, for this to occur and for parents and children to gain optimal benefit from their participation, facilitators must have: well-developed relational and technical skills; a thorough knowledge of child development; and a grounded understanding of the benefits of participatory experiences for families (Jackson, 2010, 2011).

Further, facilitators require (and do not necessarily have) a comprehensive understanding of the importance of child-driven play in which parents, or teachers for that matter, are passive observers. This type of play influences the development of resilience in children (Ginsburg, 2007) and a deeper understanding is needed of the benefits of providing very young children with opportunities to engage and explore in close proximity to, but not necessarily with, their parents.

Given that many supported playgroups are facilitated by early childhood professionals and that this is likely to continue, it is critical that their training includes preparation for the complex task of working with families in settings such as these. The supported playgroup model has been shown to be an effective mechanism to engage families. However it is of some concern that a model that is seen as successful at engaging ‘hard to reach’ families continues to be used when in some cases the facilitators who are employed to run such groups feel under-equipped to work with families experiencing vulnerabilities (Jackson, 2010, 2011). Failure to address this issue, may result in the loss of some of the opportunities to work alongside and support families that this type of service provision offers. For example, families that are most vulnerable because of their circumstances are also most likely to be affected by workforce issues.

Finally, this submission focuses specifically on issues relating to the skills and knowledge needed by professionals working in supported playgroups and models like them. Fundamental to the efficacy of this type of service provision is the integration of multidisciplinary practice. Therefore the issues raised here mirror those that need to be addressed in any early childhood setting where the aim is integrated service delivery and the provision of the ‘right door’ for families with young children.

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