

Introduction:

During 2021 and 2022 the children’s centre Occupational Therapy (OT) and Speech Pathology (SP) program engaged in a Reimagining Project. This was a process of consultation and review to strengthen the OT and SP program considering the Early Learning Strategy (ELS) and current evidence related to program priorities. Part of the Remaining Project involved a consultation phase with families. The Reimagining Project has not yet been completed, however the findings from the family consultations are shared here. This piece of work provides relevant insight into the supports parents and caregivers need in the first 1000 days of their child’s life, the opportunities for service integration and co-location, and sheds light on what may be barriers for families in accessing early supports.

Background:

In the family consultation phase of the Reimagining Project the team were particularly interested in hearing from families living with deep and persistent disadvantage. It was recognised that methods such as electronic surveys, questionnaires or focus groups may create barriers for families with the need to access technology or commit to attendance at a particular time or place. The project team decided to approach the consultation phase by asking OTs and SPs working in children’s centres to invite families to meet with them individually at a time and place convenient to the family. The consultation involved in-depth conversations with a small number of families. The conversations were had within a trusted relationship and in an environment that was comfortable and familiar to the families. OT and SP staff invited families that they knew had a lived experience of deep and persistent disadvantage or families that they knew faced multiple complexities in daily life.

Thirteen families took the opportunity to engage with the consultation. The OTs and SPs were given guiding questions based on Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory. They were also encouraged to use these questions to prompt families to tell stories about their life experiences, and were guided by principles from yarning as a research method. These in-depth conversations were recorded, and a subsequent process of thematic analysis provided insight into the lived experience of families within children’s centre communities.

Thematic Analysis:

The thematic analysis process led to the generation of the following themes:

Personal capacity	Trauma: parents have experienced traumatic events over the course of their life Parents spoke of the impact of childhood trauma, family violence, and trauma resulting from accidents and injury.
	Mental and physical health: many parents recognise their own mental and physical health challenges A range of physical and mental health conditions were spoken of and many parents were engaging with health services with varying degrees of satisfaction with the support.
	Family & relationships: are a source of strength and struggle, and many people speak of loss Parents were both providing support for extended family members and looking to receive help from family. The death of family members was frequently spoke of.

	<p>Isolation: not having people to talk or connect with or having to work hard to create positive supportive relationships Many parents spoke of not having people they can talk to about their life and struggles and recognising the need for supportive relationships but struggling to form these.</p>
Identity as a parent	<p>Making changes: becoming a parent or parenting was a motivator to make changes in life A range of changes were talked about from gaining employment and securing housing to giving up drinking.</p>
	<p>Desiring difference: wanting to parent differently to how they were parented and wanting their child to have a different childhood to their own Parents talked about their own childhood including abuse and neglect, or lack of love and attention or opportunities. There was a strong desire to ensure their child had a different experience to what they had.</p>
	<p>Showing love and delight: parents spontaneously expressed love for and delight in their children, in the midst of difficult stories Parents stories were highlighted throughout out by comments that indicated their love for and delight in their children in the midst of stories of significant trauma and challenges.</p>
Factors shaping daily life	<p>Transient nature of life: many people have moved around over their lives and may now live away from family Diverse experiences of moving within the state, country and internationally.</p>
	<p>Housing: diverse range of experiences but something many families spoke about Various challenges with finding and maintaining housing were discussed, including needing housing assistance, finding rentals or buying a house. When there were situations of secure housing parents acknowledge how supportive this was.</p>
	<p>Engagement with services: families engaged with services but had mixed experiences. Supportive relationships with people from services made experiences positive Families specifically and indirectly spoke to their experiences of engaging with a broad range of government and non-government services. Consistently they spoke of a positive experience when there was a relationship formed with the service provider/worker.</p>
	<p>Culture: recognised as an influence in life Some families talked about their cultural background and what this meant to them within their life stories.</p>

Considerations:

The Reimagining Project has not yet been concluded however from the piece of work related to the family consultations the following initial points have been highlighted and are thought to have relevance in considering both supports and barriers for families experiencing disadvantage:

- *Competing demands:* for many families accessing services for their children happens in the context of complex competing demands, both in relation to their own personal capacity and the factors that have an influence on everyday life.
- *Diversity of experience:* families within the children’s centre communities have very diverse life experiences. It is important that approaches to service delivery recognise the diversity of

life experiences and that staff and supported with skills to engage families with a diverse range of life experiences.

- *Priority of parent's needs*: in telling stories about their life experiences parents focussed a lot of aspects of the story that highlighted their own needs. The priority of parents needs should be considered within early childhood services for which the starting point is frequently the needs of the child. This also speaks to the importance of integrated services that support the family unit, and the importance as roles such as the Family Practitioner role in children's centres being easily accessible to families.
- *Entry points*: The experience of becoming a parent was a point of change for families who shared their stories. For services this is an opportunity to offer supports that aid in change and also to equip parents to follow their desires of parenting differently to how they were parented.

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