Parent support in dual-focused activities for parent and young children

Nurturing sense and sensibilities, engaging with parents locally and globally

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Abstract

Early childhood, dual-focused groups in which parents and young children participate together are increasingly available around the world. This article stems from two qualitative, doctoral research studies in Australian and English groups, exploring the concepts of nurture and support in shared parent and child activity. Eight key benefits of dual-focused support identified what parents experienced as supportive parenting provision: friendship and social network support; relational support; peer support; emotional support; parenting role support; information and resource support; 'circle of care' support; and multidisciplinary support. Through an analysis of current international discourses related to parent support across the early childhood landscape, the article discusses the importance of developing wider understandings about the value of dual-focused settings, amongst politicians, parents and practitioners.

Key words: Parents, Policy, Dual-Focused, Activity Theory

Parent support in dual-focused activities for parents and young children: The role of community, nurture and support for parents.

Introduction and Background

In many communities in both England and Australia prior to an expansion of early years services in the late 1990's, playgroups organised by parents for parents were one of the only organised opportunities for parents to find support, advice and social play experiences for their children Needham and Jackson (2012). The growth in state funding in both countries for preschool provision has been accompanied by a growing state offer in terms of financial support and direct

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organisation of groups for children and parents together in both England and Australia. These parent and child playgroups are also sometimes called 'stay and plays' or 'play and chats' and have increasingly been offered by government agencies as part of integrated service provision prior to, or alongside preschools. Government funded sessions are often facilitated by early years professionals who are expected to help organise and structure the sessions as well offer advice, support and guidance to parents and these groups we will refer to as dual-focused groups. . In the last five years many governments have shown an interest in initiatives that focus on parental engagement in children's learning as part of a range of activities to ensure that children make a good start in life (Engle et al., 2011, OECD., 2012, Schaub, 2015). States' interest in such groups can be prescriptive and we are concerned that parent-focused groups that teach parents particular parenting behaviours in classes may be promoted at the expense of dual-focused groups.

Recent research concerning the development of dual-focused initiatives continues to draw attention to their potential as sites of support for parents and children (McClean et al 2016, Colliver, 2016). We use Engestrom's (2007) model of third-generation Activity Theory to illustrate potential threats to dual-focused initiatives in recent policy initiatives because governmental purposes clash with those of parents. Interviews with parent participants in English and Australian dual-focused groups are used to argue illustrate this clash between parents' and policy makers' purposes. We argue that policy makers need to consider the way they present the case for parenting support, being more mindful of the parents' purposes.

Dual-Focused parent and child groups

In dual-focused groups in both England and Australia, parents are invited to join in with activities alongside their children. They typically offer two-hour play sessions for groups of 10 or more families and are usually facilitated by an early childhood practitioner or health visitor or both. Such groups often provide play-based activities for children, but they also have an ambition to support parents and influence the home learning environment through nuanced facilitation within a supportive and social environment (Jackson and Needham, 2014). A number of studies have identified that this dual-focused model can be highly engaging and affirming to families across diverse communities in Australia, Canada, USA and UK (Anning, 2014, Needham and

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Jackson, 2015, Williams, 2015). It is also argued that the development of trusting relationships within these groups supports the transfer of knowledge from the group to the home learning environment and that this purpose is served by the informal dual-focused group structures.

In studies by Vandenbroek (2009) and Jackson (2010), the creation of accepting, dual-focused environments that respected parents' choices and home cultures, encouraged parents engage more fully in trusting relationships with facilitators. Over emphasis on particular prescriptions for parenting may threaten the knowledge exchanges that might happen in this context. Engagement and ongoing participation over time, seems to be integral to realising the benefits of having professionals participating alongside parents. Our own studies demonstrated that enhancing the social connectedness between families, in turn promoted parents' continued participation, which then increased their access to support and reduced social isolation. These are all factors which are known to be protective for children (Ghate and Hazel, 2002; Vandenbroeck et al., 2009). If engagement and ongoing participation in groups for parents may be intrinsically linked to families, forming trusting relationships within these programs there is a need to know more about parents' expectations of such groups.

Williams et al. (2015) identified 34 research publications, reporting on 29 different dual-focussed playgroup programs. 26 of the studies reported on research conducted in Australia and eight reported on research conducted in other countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. They emphasised that there were high levels of satisfaction and benefits identified within many of the research studies, and that the provision of dual-focussed playgroups can fulfil an important community need by providing support to parents with young children. However, the review also assumed that the assessment of the playgroups to include an examination of the effectiveness of the programme on parenting outcomes, yet noted that the evidence did not enable strong claims to be made about this (Williams et al., 2015). As Jackson and Needham (2010) identified however, it is critical that we ask whether the purpose of dual-focused groups is to change parenting behaviour in particular ways. In this article, we are seeking to draw attention to the problems of an increasingly clearly defined parenting agenda.

Further, we note that despite numerous government changes, in our own countries, there is an adherence to commitments to enhance services for young children. This results in a variety of initiatives aimed at providing social connections and education to parents, in order to improve

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outcomes for their children that are often cited examples in international reviews (OECD, 2012). Importantly, Shulruf, Oloughlin & Tolley (2009) amongst others suggest that social policy in many instances is reflecting a seemingly universal international belief that diverse social problems can be fixed by addressing parenting behaviours. While it is not within the scope of this article to examine closely the epistemological and socio-political arguments pertaining to the social investment approach, it is important to note that this approach is currently driving programme and policy development internationally. For example a neoliberal ideology emphasising individual rather than state responsibility is clear in UK Prime Minister David Cameron's speech launching the Life Chances strategy in 2016. In the speech parenting support is set it within the context of 'troubled families'[1]

> *Therefore, I can announce today as we scale up the Troubled Families programme, we'll ensure that parenting skills and child development become central to how it is both targeted and how it is delivered. In the end though, getting parenting and the early years right isn't just about the hardest-to-reach families, frankly it's about everyone (Cameron, 2016).*

This suggests that the UK government perceives political value in being seen to challenge 'troubled parents' to demonstrate strength in tackling poverty and worklessness. This advances the ideology that it is families who are failing themselves, rather than that they are being disadvantaged by the social context. Emphasising parent support in this context creates significant challenges in overcoming the wider public perception that parenting classes and groups are for 'troubled families'. In the following section of the article, we present examples of how this policy discourse is shaping provision for parent and child activities.

Directions of development in parent support initiatives

In 2008, Zubrick et al. reported findings from Wave 1 of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). This study involved 10,000 children aged 0 to 5 years and some of the findings referenced to issues in Australian families. The report recommended a continuation of

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[1] The term troubled families is used to describe those who are perceived to have difficulties with parenting practices because of disadvantaged or marginalised circumstances

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policy focussed on creating communities that lessen social isolation by encouraging connection and participation that involves families and provides opportunities for children. Pertinent to this discussion, LSAC found that:

-Approximately one in four primary carers in Australia reported low levels of social support;

-Social support was an important predictor in the mental health of parents;

-Contact with parents and friends and strong feelings of 'connection' with community were strong predictors of support

These findings also reflect those of Jackson (2010) in identifying what parents experienced in the Australian supported playgroup context; Play, experiential learning and social/peer interaction amongst parents, children and facilitators lies at the heart of the supported playgroup model which seeks to position parents as partners and co-educators in a supportive community of practice (Jackson, 2010). More recently, large-scale research at the Australian 'Parenting Research Centre' (PRC) resulted in the development of a program called Smalltalk responding to calls to address early language development of disadvantaged children. This program is delivered within dual-focussed playgroups and provides a set of evidence-based strategies that help parents enhance their young children's learning in the home (PRC, 2016). These strategies are expected to help parents, particularly those who are experiencing disadvantage, improve their children's learning and development and enhance parent confidence. Facilitators may work alongside parents modelling forms of engagement and assisting them to engage with their children through talking, listening and playing, reading together and engaging in interesting activities.

2,200 parents participated in the PRC study and there were high levels of engagement and satisfaction with the Smalltalk program and increased levels of responsiveness and interactions between parents and children in the home. The development of this program emphasises what we would describe as a community sensibility, but it may also serve to illustrate the pressure on dual-focused groups to address perceived parenting problems. Our concern is that this generates a sensibility in some contexts that groups are something that society does to families rather than with families. The recent English initiative presented in the following paragraph, illustrates the sensitivity of families to such a shift in sensibility.

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In England, much of the expansion of children's centre services, including dual-focused playgroups, has been informed by research evidence from the longitudinal *Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project* (Sylva et al, 2010). While this evidence has driven increases in funding, increases in provision and developments in pedagogy, it has increasingly suited political perspectives which highlight preparation for school and poor parenting behaviours in the 'home learning environment' as key issues. In 2012, the English Coalition government introduced a scheme called CANParent as a pilot coordinating organisational structure to promoted accredited parenting programmes and offer parents payment vouchers to encourage parents to choose and value these activities (Cullen et al., 2016). The programme funds a number of private, voluntary and state led organisations to deliver parent-focused sessions that must be course based 'classes' that have a clear evidence base of effectiveness based on a model of social learning. In terms of delivering identified policy objectives, the CANparent pilot study findings indicated that, compared to no intervention, the CANparent classes were associated with significant improvements in reducing parenting stress, increasing parenting satisfaction and self-efficacy, as well as increases in mental well-being (Lindsay et al, 2014, p. 80). However, in the CANParent trial areas only 6% of eligible families took up the offer of parenting classes and a key barrier identified was the perception that groups were for 'dysfunctional parents' and not for all parents.

The majority of parents in the voucher trial areas regarded family and friends as being a better source of parenting knowledge and advice than that available from professionals. This is particularly interesting in light of Jackson's (2010) findings that found that dual-focused groups provided a non-stigmatising, social environment in which peer-to-peer learning was an underestimated form of support that positively influenced parent child interactions, parenting confidence and learning about child development.

> R: *So do you think that you've learned anything about interactions with (H) [child] from coming to play group?*
>
> D: *Well, before I had H, I didn't really know anything about kids or babies. And I think a lot of it that I did pick up was from coming here. Most of it, probably, yeah.*
>
> R: *And how do you think you've picked it up? Do they run particular classes about that sort of thing, or is it watching people?*

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> *D: No, it's watching and observing other people with their kids, and then hearing conversations. And I've asked a lot of advice off a lot of the other mums.*
>
> *(Researcher and young parent)*

In the remainder of the article, we wish to illustrate further how many parents' purposes and how more prescriptive governmental objectives may conflict with and compromise the aspects of dual- focused groups that parents find supportive.

Theory and method of analysis

The analysis of parents' purposes that follows draws from two independent studies developed and conducted in England and Australia. Both studies explored three case studies in their respective countries as positive examples of how dual-focused groups engage and support parents in their interactions with their children aged zero to five. The findings presented here are taken from semi-structured interviews with selected parents mothers in individual interviews conducted alongside the dual-focused sessions. Some of the facilitators' interviews from the same groups are also used to elaborate on some of the points raised. Both studies drew from the ecological paradigm (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 2003) and a sociocultural approach has been adopted to compare the purposes, tools, and roles of the adults involved in the groups (Engeström, Miettinen, and Punamaki, 1999; Rogoff 2003; Hedegaard and Fleer 2008). The researchers used qualitative multi-case methodology to explore how and why the dual-focused groups engaged families. Data collection processes were subject to the ethical scrutiny of two universities' doctoral programmes.

For this article, we wanted to elaborate on the theoretical basis for considering both sense and sensibility in the analysis of activity. We employ this as a conceptual tool in the analysis that follows where it is used in order to reflect on how different parents' purposes frame their

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expectations and perceptions of the feel of dual-focused sessions. We then discuss how these expectations might be challenged by increasingly prescriptive macro-level policies.

Many scholars have developed the work of Vygotsky and his colleagues Luria and Leont'ev, in extending key aspects of Marx's view of knowledge as 'socially framed' to construct a psychological framework in Sociocultural Activity Theory (Engeström, 1999; Daniels, 2001). Activity Theory includes a range of approaches that view the learner as part of a system of mutually affective elements. They share a focus on the *subject* i.e., the individuals participating in the activity; the object i.e. the objectives or purposes of those participating in the activity and the mediating *tools* employed in the activity, which might be objects or ideas. Second generation activity theory, as framed by Engeström (2007) and Daniels (2001), adds *rules, community and division of labour* to Leontev's first generation model of *subject, object* and *purpose* (see figure 1).

Engeström (2007) suggested 'studying the connections between the elements of activity' to be a third generation of activity theory. This additional dimension recognises that the subject, mediator and artefact do not operate in isolation but have their views and interaction shaped by wider cultural factors, hence their perceptions of the six aspects of the field of activity may differ and give rise to tensions and change. This third generation model is well suited to the purpose of researching parent and child groups as it questions how subjects' (children, parents and practitioners) participation is mediated by other group members and wider social discourses (Needham & Jackson, 2012, Anning, 2014). In the analysis that follows, we follow the approach advocated by Rogoff (2003) of focussing an investigationl lens on particular aspect of the activity framework, in this case parents' reported purposes in attending dual-focused groups. We then seek to show how these varying purposes influence the aspects of the framework of activity.

We have already suggested that different types of parenting support carry an emotional, as well as cognitive "sense"; this is generated not just within the way groups conduct activity, but by external social expectations related to the activity. We now argue that whether ideas are acquired or rejected from the group is influenced, at least in part, by feelings and sensibilities. In support of our use of this idea within the activity theory framework, we cite Engeström's (1999)
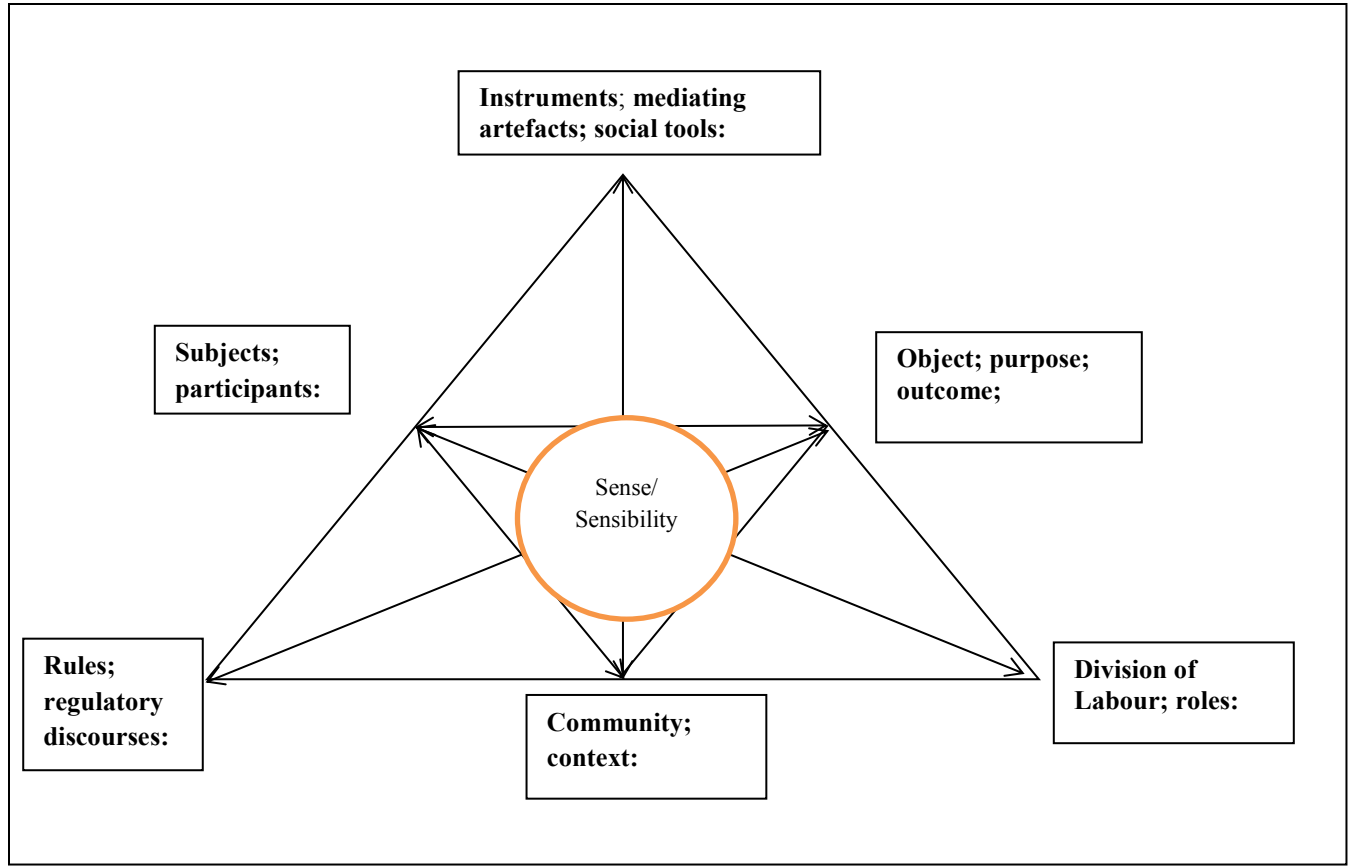
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assertion that Activity Theory in social psychology is consistent with attempts in sociology to use *action* to explain how infidel agency and societal structures engage with and influence one another allowing for the reproduction and evolution of cultural practices.

Holland and Lachicotte (2007) present a model of the individual as a reflective dialogic self, constructed in interaction with the social world focusing on interpersonal interactions and personal reflections. They support the idea that the study of the subject through the lens of activity should consider affective responses. Thus, at the heart of any shared activity, participants are generating a shared sense of purpose and understanding including elements of negotiated shared feeling towards their participation. We have tried to emphasise this idea of activity generating both a meaningful sense and an emotional sensibility in the model presented in Figure 1. We do not see sense and sensibility as separate but we believe it is important to recognise both aspects in the analysis of activity.

Figure 1 A model of Third Generation Activity Theory featuring sense and sensibility

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Instruments; mediating artefacts; social tools:

Subjects; participants:

Object; purpose; outcome;

Sense/ Sensibility

Rules; regulatory discourses:

Community; context:

Division of Labour; roles:

In the findings that follow, we focus on parents' purposes in attending dual focused groups using the activity theory framework above. We then present an analysis of potential barriers to the policy directions identified in the preceding examination of the political discourse because of the tensions between political and personal purposes and the different senses and sensibilities that they may generate.

Findings

Parents' views and sense about why they attended dual-focused groups and what they perceived they gained from the groups shared several features across both countries and different groups. The findings also illustrate some of the more subtle emphasises offered by different parents. In the examples of parents' purposes presented here, we seek to reflect on the range of benefits to both parents and children in order to return to consider how these might be supported or discouraged by the policy initiatives discussed in the literature review.

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<u>Benefits for Children</u>

Social support

The key motivation offered by many parents for attending parent and child groups was to provide opportunities for their children to become accustomed to being in social environments alongside other children. This is highlighted in the first example below, where the purpose is nestled alongside other child-focused purposes about spending quality time together. It is also evident in several of the subsequent examples.

> *It is good for him to mix with other children, he does go to nursery, but it is good to be here doing things with me and his brother and sister as well and doing activities together. And when they are all a little bit older because they are only 5 or 6 months at the moment but it will be good for them to mix with me being there as well. I think my role, well because they are so little, just looking after them all. But it is nice for me to come and do something with Evan together. I would hope that we could play together and do things although sometimes he doesn't and sometimes I'm too busy but it is a chance for us to be out of the house together with other people around instead of us three in the house. (Parent*)

Learning support

Parents identified play as a very important aspect of attendance at the groups. They were appreciative of the alternative and extended range of learning materials and experiences that were available in all the groups studied. Children's play was seen as fundamental and the facilitators in these cases were successful in creating welcoming play environments that were rich in child-driven and adult-directed experiences. Activities and play spaces were provided that engaged the broad range of children who attended the groups, and offered them play opportunities in which they could participate independently, with their peers or with their parents and other adults.

> Yes, that's why we were there, to play. The group was about playing with the children and you focus on that… I felt it was a time to learn about playing with your child and for me, here [at home], often there are so many other pressures of work and tidying up

> that playing with T here [at home] wasn't like quality time to play. Going to playgroup felt like an opportunity to quality play. (Parent)

Benefits for Parents

Friendship and social network support

In both studies the creation of social spaces for parents that emphasised positive relationships and provided opportunities for social interaction enabled the development of significant friendships and social networks. This assisted in the reduction of social isolation and contributed to parents' sense of wellbeing, confidence and ability to support one another.

> *Time for me to have a chat, it's nice to know that there are plenty of activities for them[children] to do so you can just relax and have a chat and I've been coming here for three years now so in itself it's a support so you can share problems and share ideas. (Parent)*

The ability for these groups to support positive interactions with and between all families was integral to what parents experienced as supportive and this was true regardless of whether families were perceived to be vulnerable or well functioning as is often the case in targeted, government-funded programs.

Relational support

Some of the parents found establishing relationships with other adults challenging. Enhancing social connectedness among parents in groups sometimes required facilitators to manage difficult group dynamics. Mediation processes were used to address challenging issues or behaviours when they arose and this furthered the positive development of relationships within groups. Importantly, these processes enabled parents' continued participation in the groups, which resulted in their continuing access to support but it also helped some parents to identify strategies for negotiating relationships in other contexts.

> There's always the risk that people will come [to the group] and actually be harmed because the interactions are negative towards them, and they actually go away feeling less well off than when they came. So because

of that risk, I think it's quite important to keep an eye on the overall dynamic, and make sure that that stays positive... more consciously demonstrating strength- based parenting... Because... if you feel judged as well, it doesn't really help you change. It just makes you feel more probably bad about yourself...

(Facilitator)

Peer support

Peer support emerged as an important element these groups. There were numerous examples of how parents used their interactions with other parents to increase their knowledge and parenting skills and as a means to view their children's behaviour from varying perspectives. Many parents described their increased sense of confidence in parenting as a result of observing their children in relation to others at similar stages of development and in interactions with adults other than themselves.

> R: *So do you have any new knowledge or insights as a result of attending the playgroup?*
>
> X: *My understanding of myself as a parent and of other people's skills as parents.*
>
> Y: *You do pick up things, like if your child is going through something you can talk to other parents and get more of an idea of what to do.*
>
> P: *Yes, and you can see that everybody has different styles of parenting. It's OK.*
>
> X: *I know myself you come in and think it should be like this and gradually you see it works for them and it works for me and it has helped me very much with child rearing and learning to relax. (Focus group parents)*

Emotional support

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Emotional support was integral to the relationships developed by group facilitators with parents, particularly in cases where parents were known not to have experienced nurturing relationships themselves. Parents benefited greatly from facilitators expressing genuine care and respect for them and appreciated being listened to. It was important to them to develop relationships with facilitators that were based on mutual respect, understanding and care and this type of support enhanced their ability to provide nurturing care to their children.

> *The friendships that they make, I think, is the most important aspect...when you look at all of that happen, and I think as workers, if we can set that up and set the forum up for them to meet in a safe space and be there if they need us, is fantastic, because they can do the rest... (Facilitator)*

To add to this, many parents reported that they now participated in broader community activities and had increased their social networks and become more linked to their local school or community as a result of their playgroup attendance.

> *...it [playgroup] might hold mums together... and keeps communities closer-knit, or strengthens the bonds in a community so people can help each other a bit more because they know each other a bit better. It's probably not something you can really quantify... I walk around the community and I'm like, hello, hello and I know lots and lots of people and I can see him [partner] going, you seem to know everyone around here. And how valuable is that? How do you quantify or put a value on that, the fact that you can walk around in your own community and know people?*   *(Parent)*

Parenting role support

Creating non-judgmental spaces in which parents were unconditionally accepted and respected affirmed their roles as the most important people in their children's lives. In turn, this promoted safe environments in which positive behaviours were modelled and gentle guidance in relation to child development and parental expectations was provided. Under these circumstances parents gained new insights that were reflected in positive changes in their relationships with their children.

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> *I think just watching how the things that the workers [facilitators] do with the kids, and watching what they' re… the interactions that they have with the kids gives you ideas on what you can do at home with the kids. Whereas normally you just go, Oh go away, I've had enough of you. Go away.* *(Young parent)*

Information and resource support

The playgroup facilitators' broad knowledge of local service systems, combined with their knowledge of child development and learning, enabled them to assist parents with timely and practical support in addressing pressing needs. Providing access to information and resources at a time and place that was appropriate and relevant was extremely important to parents in this context and reflected the soft entry nature of the service provision.

> *I remember there was one time, B threw a tantrum and one of the staff came because I was struggling to know what to do…and she said something or suggested a book I could read... And it just made me realise that there was a different way of handling that situation than the one I was using. Which was obviously not working anyway. (Parent)*

'Circle of care' support

It was extremely beneficial to have the needs of more vulnerable families in the playgroups met by a broader network of health, education and social welfare professionals who work in partnership with the facilitators. By creating a 'circle of care', facilitators were able to draw on relevant resources that enabled a holistic approach within the groups. This enabled the provision of emotional and practical support that enhanced families' ongoing participation.

> *I think the environment we create of informal support around the professional experts who are coming, that just makes all that so accessible, because it is a single point of contact, which is a preferred way of receiving services for a young person. (Facilitator)*

Multidisciplinary support

Providing multidisciplinary support assisted parents to access, within the playgroup context, a range of formal services that they may not have been able to access otherwise. The playgroups

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created non-clinical, non-stigmatising environments in which other professionals (such as early childhood intervention teachers, social workers or speech therapists) could work with parents and children. Families' access to other types of support was increased substantially by embedding services in this way.

> *...what we were able to bring to the parents by having that amazing resource of skilled workers who were all there, with the aim to benefit young parents' l i v e s and their children's lives, was a fantastic strength… (Facilitator)*

The emotional sensibility of the dual-focussed playgroups studied for the parents

Parents' purposes suggested that they elected to attend the groups and continued to attend for an extended period because the groups met one or more of the different support needs identified above. Many of the parents' purposes identified with feeling supported, being respected and accepted as they are because the conversations and activities individualised to them and their child by the group context. The time that the facilitators took to get to know the parent and child as individuals and together contributed to an emotional sensibility that supported the self-image of the parents as being the key person in the child's life but also left some space for them to be themselves and find their own identity as a parent among other parents. By arriving at the sessions, the parents gained a feeling of being a 'good parent' providing a worthwhile and enjoyable experience for their child. They gained a feeling of being part of a community of good parents grappling with and exploring the challenges of parenthood. Even in taking some time to chat in the sessions parents were enabling the child's independence but providing a secure point of attachment from which to explore. Providing a space for parents to be implies affording them the space to select, reflect, share and choose how to be.

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Conclusion; tensions between parents' purposes and the political purposes for parent and child groups

In both the English and Australian policy contexts, there is a political and societal pressure to promote effective parenting and there is also some recognition of the need to develop non-stigmatising provision to support this. However, despite the explicitly stated desire of leaders in both countries to move away from being a 'nanny state' that interferes in home-life and directs parents, policy making seems to experience a cultural haunting (Walkerdine, 2014) such that politicians find it difficult to talk about parenting support in a playful, celebratory, leisurely context. Rather, there is perceived political obligation to emphasise duty, responsibility and, failure in parenting. The social investment approach is perceived by many to reframe social problems as individual problems, thereby pathologising families and 'pedagogicalising' parents (Vandenbroeck, 2007; Vandenbroeck et al., 2009). Major outcomes arising from this approach are that parents, particularly mothers, are blamed for children's poor outcomes and there is a perpetuation of the view that all parents need training to teach them how to raise their children. At the same time, there has been a decline in systemic responsibility for addressing problematic social structures such as those related to housing, health, education and employment, resulting in inequalities that affect family functioning and parenting.

We have tried to argue that there is an important role that dual-focused groups have been playing in both England and Australia in developing social spaces where parents, who may have had little in common previously, can come together and form new parental identities alongside supportive peers and practitioners. Importantly the practitioners have additional responsibilities and resources to support those most in need and that such spaces are able to offer support for parenting practices, alongside other forms of support for parents and their children. Whatever a government's ideology and resources we would argue that there is a need to keep a range of parents' purpose in mind if we wish to realise the supportive benefits of parent and child groups. Failure to engage with parents' purposes will continue to distance families from potentially supportive services and serve to undermine many parents' confidence. We hope that policy makers will continue to recognise the value of dual-focussed groups that support and nurture communities of parents learning from each other, rather than insisting only on more prescriptive courses.

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