

Building inclusive communities for all children and families

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Introduction

Fundamental assumptions

- Our job (as professionals, services, governments and society) is to create the conditions families need to raise their children as they (and we) would wish
- All parents want to do the best for their children, and only fail to do so because their circumstances or resources or personal history conspire against them

Key questions

- What are the 'good enough' conditions and experiences needed by infants and young children to develop well?
- What are the conditions and supports needed by families to enable them to rear young children as they would wish?
- What are the qualities of communities that enable families of young children to rear their children as they would wish?
- What contribution can government make to supporting communities and families in rearing young children as they would wish?

Need for change

There are five main reasons why change is needed, why we need to reconfigure our services in order to achieve better outcomes for young children, families and society:

- Major social and economic changes – global and local
- Changes in families and family circumstances
- Service delivery issues – problems in meeting child and family needs
- Worsening developmental outcomes
- New knowledge of factors affecting child development, family functioning and the role of communities

This paper will focus on two of these issues: the problems that the existing service system is having in meeting the needs of all families, and what we have learned about the factors that impact upon the ability of families to raise their children as they (and we) would wish.

Service delivery issues – problems in meeting child and family needs

The first issue to be considered concerns the difficulties that the existing service system is having in meeting the needs of all children and families.

Challenges currently facing services for children and families

- First, the service system is having difficulty providing support to all families who are eligible
- Second, services cannot meet all the needs of families that they do serve
 - no single service is capable of meeting the complex needs of many families
 - these unmet needs may loom larger in the lives of parents than the needs of the child with a developmental or mental health problem.
- Third, families have difficulty finding out about and accessing the services they need
- Fourth, services are often not well integrated with one another and are therefore unable to provide cohesive support to families
- Fifth, services have difficulty tailoring their services to meet the diverse needs of families
- Sixth, services are typically treatment-oriented rather than prevention- or promotion-focused, and therefore cannot respond promptly to emerging child and family needs
- Seventh, the service system does not maintain continuous contact with families of young children during the early years
- Eighth, many families are isolated and lack supportive personal networks - extended family, friends or other families of young children
- Ninth, the early childhood field is undervalued and underfunded, and has difficulty attracting and retaining staff
- Tenth, many people working with children and families have not had opportunities to learn about recent early childhood research findings
- Finally, many people working with children and families have not been trained in ways of working with families

Systemic issues

- Government departments, research disciplines and service sectors tend to work in 'silos', despite there being strong arguments for greater service integration and a 'whole of government' approach to service delivery
- Responsibility for provision of services to young children and their families is spread across three levels of government - federal, state, and local - with different planning processes and funding priorities
- The combined effect of the growth in the numbers of aged people and the decline in the birth rate will be a reduction in the proportion of the population which is

working and therefore paying taxes - thus creating a 'welfare squeeze' which reduces the general funds available for services

- Most specialist intervention services are already underfunded, and it is looking increasingly unlikely that they can ever be fully funded in their present forms
- Governments are more concerned about promoting general economic growth than reducing economic disparities, despite evidence of the link between widening social inequalities and worsening developmental outcomes
- Governments spend a disproportionate amount on services for adults and the aged, in comparison to the very young, despite the greater developmental importance of the early years and the greater likelihood of young children living in poverty

Hard-to-reach families

All services are reporting an increase in the proportion of families who have multiple problems. Formal professional services are not very successful in engaging such families, for a variety of reasons:

- Such families lack strong links with their local communities
- They do not know how to negotiate with services to get what they want, or even to find out what they are entitled to
- They may have difficulties accessing services because of lack of money or transport
- They may not be comfortable with the formal tone of many of the services
- They may have had very poor experiences with professional services previously

These families are the ones who are most at risk of poor developmental outcomes for their children and poor health and mental health outcomes for the parents.

What do we need to do to ensure that these families and children have better outcomes? To answer this, we need to look at what we have learned about the conditions that families need to raise their children as they (and we) would wish.

Conditions families need to raise their children as they (and we) would wish

There are three related concepts we need to come to grips with.

- One is the notion of **social support** or **personal support networks**. These refer to the people in our lives, usually our family and friends, who are the most immediate sources of emotional and practical support. The strength of people's personal support networks varies according to how many people they have in their social network, what sort of tangible support they provide, and how often they see them.
- The second is the notion of **social connectedness** or **social capital**. These refer to the nature of the linkages within communities, which can vary according to the general level of trust and reciprocity in the relationships between members of the community.
- The third key concept is that of **social infrastructure**, which refers to the facilities and services available to families, and the nature of the built environment in which

they live. What matters about facilities and services is how accessible they are to families – financially and geographically, as well as family-friendly.

All three of these factors are known to direct or indirect effects on the functioning of individuals, families and communities.

Social support and personal support networks

Social support is believed to have both stress-preventive and stress-buffering features:

- On one hand, social support surrounds individuals with emotional and practical help that promotes their well-being
- On the other hand, social support reduces the toll of stressful events by helping people cope effectively

What are the key features of social support?

- Social support can have both direct and indirect influences on child development and behaviour: direct influences occur through variations in the range and variety of people with whom the child has contact, while indirect influences occur through benefits to the parents and the family in general, which help them meet the child's needs more effectively. Thus, children's development can be affected by events in settings in which the children are not even present.
- Social support can be provided by both informal and formal social network members, that is, by family and friends, or by service providers.
- Informal support has a greater influence on the personal functioning of parents than formal support: when in need of help or support, people tend to turn to family and friends first of all, then to others in their wider circle of acquaintances, and only then to professionals.
- This phenomenon can be best understood in terms of Urie Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model of development. He proposed that children's development was influenced not only by the more proximal, and relatively stronger influences, of the family and friends, but also by the more distal features of the broader social environment such as the community, formal services, and governmental policies. This model is usually depicted as a series of concentric circles, with the child and family in the innermost circle. What is particularly important to understand about this model is that the circles represent ever-diminishing sources of influence the further they are from the centre. Formal services (such as early childhood intervention programs) are relatively distal, and are therefore likely to have a lesser impact on family functioning than the extended family and friends.
- Not all social networks are supportive: people can be surrounded by a large network of individuals who are not supportive or they can have a small number of close friends who very supportive. More commonly, people's networks are made up of a mixture of positive, neutral and negative contacts.
- Whether support provided by professionals has the same beneficial effects depends upon the parents' need for support: those with high needs are likely to experience such support positively while those with low needs may experience it

negatively. Similarly, where the support offered does not match the parents' needs, it is experienced negatively.

- Whether support provided by professionals has the same beneficial effects also depends upon the nature of the relationship between parents and the professionals: the more that parents perceive professionals as being part of their informal social network, then the more likely they are to consult them or seek their support. (This does not mean that professionals have to become friends with all parents, but it does mean that they need to establish comfortable working relationships with them. To achieve this, they need to stay around long enough, be available often enough, and have the personal qualities and skills to relate well to people of diverse backgrounds.)
- By virtue of its capacity to influence child, parent and family functioning, social support functions as a form of early intervention, providing supportive experiences and opportunities beyond those directly provided by early intervention programs. As an environmental variable, social support operates whether or not it is deliberately manipulated.
- The larger and more diverse an individual's social network, the more access he or she will have to functional social relationships, and the more potential benefits there are likely to be for health and well-being.
- Social support may have a more positive effect on health and health-related behaviour, especially in times of stress, if it is provided by people of the same gender, age, ethnicity and socioeconomic background, or by people who have shared similar life-experiences.
- Social support has direct benefits for family functioning but mostly influences child functioning in indirect ways: the primary function of such support systems is to provide a more solid parenting foundation from which parents may, in turn, facilitate more positive child development.

Social support has a significant impact on the functioning of children and families. Social support has been found to be linked to a number of child and family outcomes, including

- low birthweight,
- child abuse and child neglect,
- maternal adjustment,
- maternal mental health, and
- maternal physical health

Social capital and social connectedness

Social capital consists of networks of social relations which are characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity:

- There are various forms of trust, including trust in members of one's immediate and extended family, trust in strangers, and trust in the formal institutions of governance

- Reciprocity is the process of exchange within relationships whereby 'goods and services' provided by one person are repaid in some way by the person receiving them.
- Thus, in communities that are high in social capital, there are strong connections between members of the community based on mutual trust and reciprocal exchanges.

Like social support, social capital is thought to have direct benefits for individuals and communities:

- Social capital, and access to such capital, is related to improved health, greater well-being according to self-reported survey measures, better care for children, lower crime rates, and improved government - regions or states with higher levels of trust.
- When social capital is high and communities are well-connected, children and families benefit in a number of direct and indirect ways: in particular, they give families access to information that helps them gain a realistic understanding of their child's development and of the possible impact of developmental changes on family life.
- In well-connected communities, families have many opportunities for incidental encounters with other children and other parents within the local neighbourhood, encounters that can provide such information, reduce the intensity of uncertainty and alleviate parental anxiety.
- However, not all families have equal access to such opportunities: the network resources available to parents vary substantially depending upon parents' educational experience, income, occupation, the number of parents in the household, race, and even in the culture in which they live.

Such factors serve to reduce the number of eligible people with whom the parents can form relationships, so that they are at risk of becoming socially isolated. Isolation can be the result of a number of factors, including

- geographic isolation (living in rural and remote areas)
- physical isolation (being cut off from the local neighbourhood by a six-lane highway)
- poor health, disability or special needs
- cultural isolation (not being able to speak the language)
- social isolation (being new to an area and not knowing anyone)
- reduction in support provided by extended families as a result of increased mobility and other factors (eg. grandmothers may be unavailable to provide child care because they are still working)
- increase in the number of single parent families (with associated financial stresses and time pressures)
- lack of money to reciprocate hospitality
- increase in the number of mothers in the workforce (with consequent reduction in time with the children and with other parents)
- difficulty in accessing services or settings used by other families (because of lack of personal or public transport)
- perception that local environments are unsafe

Unfortunately, it is often those most in need of social support who are most isolated.

It is obvious that the nature and extent of people's personal support networks and the nature of the social connections or social capital in the wider community are likely to be closely linked. It is certainly possible for individual in dysfunctional and poorly connected communities to have strong personal networks, but it is much less likely.

Social infrastructure

Social infrastructure refers to the facilities and services available to families, and the nature of the built environment in which they live.

- **Facilities** include parks, adventure playgrounds, libraries, swimming pools and shopping centres
- **Services** include transport as well as formal and informal universal and specialist child and family services
- The **built environment** includes roads and footpaths, the connectivity and permeability of street layouts, and the accessibility of services and facilities

Why are these important for families?

Facilities matter because they are places where families of young children can meet. The social support evidence considered above suggests that families do better when they have good personal networks, including other families with young children. To build such networks, families need multiple opportunities to meet other families with young children, and community facilities can provide these.

Key features of facilities that impact on families include

- the number and range of facilities in the neighbourhood
- how child- and family-friendly they are
- how safe they are
- what they cost to use
- how easy they are to get to

Services matter because they provide essential direct services (medical, maternal and child health, child care, kindergartens) to complement the informal support that families get from their personal networks. For families and children with additional needs, they also provide specialist support that the families would be unlikely to be able to access through their personal networks.

Services include a wide range of informal services (run by churches, charities and volunteer agencies) as well as the usual range of services funded by local, state and federal governments. Neighbourhoods and communities may vary in the range and variety of services available to them.

What matters about facilities and services is how accessible they are to families. Accessibility has three key features:

- Financial accessibility – services need to be affordable

- Geographical accessibility – services need to be easy to get to
- Family-friendly – services need to be welcoming for the full range of people who live in the community

The ***built environment*** matters for at least two reasons: it affects the ease with which families can access services and facilities, and it affects the number of people that families have contact with.

One of these forms of feedback that is often overlooked is the information we receive through contact with others in the street and other public places: neighbours learn from each other because they pass each other, and each other's houses and shops, on the footpath. It turns out that footpaths are important not just by virtue of their primary function of providing pedestrian access to places, but also because they allow information exchange between total strangers, and they mix large numbers of individuals in random configurations.

This suggests that urban design plays a role in facilitating contact between people. This is in fact the basis for a town planning movement known as the New Urbanism that has championed the cause of humanising city and urban environments. This movement treats neighbourhoods as walkable catchments, with street layouts being analysed according to the degree to which they provide most residents with walkable access to the neighbourhood's centre, which may be shops, bus or train stops, or other community focal points. In general, most people will walk 400 metres or five minutes to a centre, or 800 metres or ten minutes to a major transit stop, if the route is pleasant and direct. The accessibility and connectivity of neighbourhood catchments are analysed using '***pedshed mapping***', a tool which identifies the proportions of residents living in a 400 metre radius of a neighbourhood centre as well as those who are actually within 400 metres walk of that centre.

An example of New Urbanism principles at work is the *Liveable Neighbourhoods* project of the Western Australian Planning Commission. Comparisons between traditional suburban neighbourhoods in Perth such as Mt. Lawley and new developments such as Ballajura reveal that the old neighbourhoods score much higher on key features such as connectivity, permeability and accessibility. It is simply easier in old-style suburban neighbourhoods to walk to where you need to go and you are likely to see more people in the process.

Note that the issues at stake here are not simply environmental issues such as reducing the dependence upon cars and increasing the amount of exercise people get (although these are matters of importance). The question of interest here is the way that urban environments can promote contact between people or serve to isolate them. In the case of families with young children, what is important is how many of the services they need are within what the *Sure Start* planners in the UK call 'pram pushing distance', how pleasant and safe the walk is, and how many other families with young children are they are likely to meet on the way or when they get there.

Reconfiguring early child and family services

Although we have only considered some of the reasons why change is needed, it should be clear that we need to reconfigure early child and family support services in order to achieve better outcomes for young children, families and society. What form should this change take? Based on the work that my colleagues and I at the Centre for Community Child Health have done over the past five years, we believe that there are three main ways in which change is needed: we need better integrated communities, better integrated services, and improved forms of dialogue between communities and services.

- ***Better integrated communities.*** As a result of the pervasive economic, social and demographic changes that have occurred over the past few decades, there has been a partial erosion of traditional family and neighbourhood support networks. This has left a greater proportion of parents of young children with relatively poor social support networks and therefore more vulnerable. The evidence we have already considered about the importance of social support and social connectedness strongly suggests that one way in which we could address this problem is by providing families of young children with multiple opportunities to meet other families of young children. Complexity theory suggests that there is value in random encounters as well.
- ***Better integrated services.*** In the light of the difficulties that services have in meeting all the needs of all families effectively, the service system needs to become better integrated, so as to be able to meet the multiple needs of services in a more seamless way. We need to turn the system around so that it puts the customer first, tailoring our services to the needs and circumstances of families rather than the needs of professional and bureaucracies.
- ***Improved forms of dialogue between communities and services.*** For the service system to become more responsive to the emerging needs of young children and families, we need better ways of communicating, more constant feedback. This needs to occur at all levels, involving service providers in their dealings with individual families, agencies with their client groups, and service systems with whole communities. For individual professionals, this means using a service philosophy such as family-centred practice as well as needs-assessment procedures and tools that regard parent input as being as important as professional input. For service systems, it means developing skills in talking to communities of families – in other words, community-centred practice.

(For more details, see the Centre for Community Child Health's ***Platforms for Change*** model attached to this paper.)

Conclusions

Key messages for human services

- All forms of child and family services are struggling to meet the needs of eligible families, and may therefore be regarded as being under-funded
- The cost of fully funding all these services in their present form may be prohibitive

- None of this is necessarily the result of bad policies or government neglect – it is more the outcome of economic and social change, as well as the unintended consequences of policies that have proved remarkably successful in other ways
- We do not do a good job of engaging and supporting families who are marginalised and poorly resourced, especially our indigenous population

Key messages for early childhood services

- What early childhood educators provide is profoundly important for children, their families and the wider society
- Nevertheless, the early childhood education field needs to be actively engaged in the process of rethinking of how child and family services can best support families of young children
- Exactly how early childhood services need change is still to be determined, although some aspects are clear, including
 - opening up services to greater parental involvement and parent / professional partnerships
 - establishing stronger links with other child and family services
 - breaking down the barriers between child care and education

Implications for early childhood and family support services

What are the implications of this big picture for early childhood and family support services?

We need to create the conditions that enable families to raise their children as they and we would wish. This includes the following:

- We need to provide families of young children with multiple opportunities to meet with other families with young children
- We need urban environments that are easy to navigate and that provide lots of opportunities for random encounters between people in the community.
- We should provide families of young children with easy access to family-friendly settings where they can meet other families.
- We should be providing isolated families with help in establishing supportive personal support networks.

We should provide families with high quality, universally available and easily accessible mainstream and specialist services. This includes the following:

- We need to provide a range of high quality universal services (including a kindergarten year or its equivalent for all children)
- We need to ensure that these services are easily accessible to all families – financially, geographically and family-friendly (which may mean, among other things, restoring full funding for kindergartens)

- We need a better integrated service system that is easy to access and flexible enough to respond holistically to the emerging needs of children and families.
- We need to restructure our services so as to be able to respond to the emerging needs of children and families
- We need to break down barriers between services, between family and work, and between schools and communities
- We need to rethink relationships between universal and secondary / tertiary services

We should engage communities as partners in our collective efforts to support families with young children. This includes the following:

- We should seek to create the conditions under which communities can determine their own collective needs.
- We need to develop our skills in working with communities, ie. community-centred practice
- We need to adopt a family-centred approach to community building, with the ultimate aim of becoming ‘a community in which the economic, physical, and social environment enhances the well-being of the children and families living in it’ (Weissbourd, 2000). This approach has been dubbed *family-centred community building*. Championed by former US Vice-President Al Gore and others, family-centered community building focuses on communities from a family perspective:

‘Most of all, [Family Centered Community Building] is a movement to put the family smack in the middle of community-building, asking at each step of the way, “Does this effort support strong relationships among family members? Does this effort help families do their job of caring for and encouraging all their members? Does this effort bring the whole family and all its members into a greater sense of connection and contribution to community?” ’
(Erickson and Louv, 2002)

Above all, we need a paradigm shift in how we fund and deliver services to families and young children, and how services and governments relate to families and communities.

References

For further details and references re ***social support, social capital*** and ***social infrastructure*** (including references), see

Moore, T.G. (2004). Blazing new trails: Finding the most direct routes in early childhood intervention. Invited address to *6th National Conference of Early Childhood Intervention Australia*, Melbourne, July.
<http://www.eciavic.org.au/professionals/Conf%202004/Blazingnewtrails-TimMooreECIANatConf2004.pdf>

Moore, T.G. (2005). Improving support for families of young children: The role of communities. Paper presented at *9th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference*, 9th-11th February, Melbourne.

<http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/afrc9/moore1.html>

For a full account of the five ***reasons why change is needed*** as well as details of Centre for Community Child Health resources that have been developed (or are in the process of being developed) to support change, see

Moore, T.G., McLoughlin, J. and Oberklaid, F. (2005). Strengthening services and supports for families of young children. Paper presented at *4th Australian Family and Community Strengths Conference*, Newcastle, 6th December.

(File in .pdf form available from author.)

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Weissbourd, B. (2000). Supportive communities for children and families. **Public Health Reports**, **115** (2), 167-173.

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PLATFORMS FOR CHANGE

	COMMUNITY PLATFORM	INTERFACE	SERVICE PLATFORM
AIMS	To build rich and supportive social environments for families with young children	To develop ways in which the service system is able to respond promptly and effectively to the emerging needs of young children and their families	To build a well-coordinated and easily accessible system of services for young children and their families
PROCESSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping community social and cultural demographics • Identifying individual and collective priorities of families • Identifying and building on community strengths and resources • Ensuring families of young children have multiple opportunities to meet • Promoting family-friendly services and facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging communities as partners in planning and monitoring services and resources • Developing effective ways for parents and professionals to share their concerns, knowledge and expertise • Training professionals in how to establish partnerships with families • Training professionals in ways of helping families monitor their children's development • Training professionals in how to help families identify concerns about parenting and family functioning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping professional services • Simplifying parental access to information and services • Developing common service philosophies and protocols • Promoting services based on evidence and best practice • Promoting provision of high quality services • Providing systematic training for professionals • Developing innovative service models based on strong evidence and clear rationales
SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A better informed and empowered community • A community environment that is more supportive of families • Stronger social support networks for families • Fewer isolated or marginalised families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More effective communication between parents and professionals • A service system that responds promptly to the emerging needs of young children and their families • Earlier identification of children with developmental or health needs • Provision of more effective interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved coordination and collaboration between services • Improved capacity of services to address holistic needs of families • Easier access to services • Greater consistency of service delivery across the system • Services reoriented to prevention and early intervention
LONG-TERM OUTCOMES	IMPROVED HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE		

Kindergarten Parents Victoria / Lady Gowrie Child Centre
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CONFERENCE
2nd June 2006

BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES FOR ALL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Tim Moore

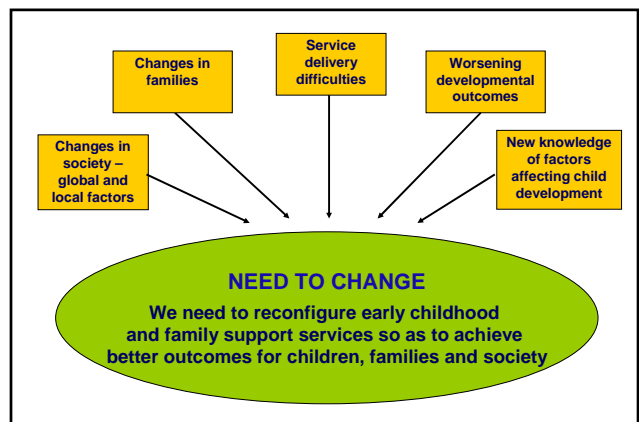
Centre for Community Child Health,
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FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS

- Our job (as professionals, services, governments and society) is to create the conditions families need to raise their children as they (and we) would wish
- All parents want to do the best for their children, and only fail to do so because their circumstances or resources or personal history conspire against them

KEY ISSUES

- What are the 'good enough' conditions and experiences needed by infants and young children to develop well?
- What are the conditions and supports needed by families to enable them to rear young children as they (and we) would wish?
- What are the qualities of communities that enable families of young children to rear their children as they would wish?
- What contribution can government make to supporting communities and families in rearing young children as they would wish?



PROBLEMS IN MEETING CHILD AND FAMILY NEEDS VIA CURRENT SYSTEM

CHALLENGES CURRENTLY FACING SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

- First, the service system is having difficulty providing support to all families who are eligible
- Second, services cannot meet all the needs of families that they do serve
 - no single service is capable of meeting the complex needs of many families
 - these unmet needs may loom larger in the lives of parents than the needs of the child with a developmental or mental health problem.
 - Third, families have difficulty finding out about and accessing the services they need

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- Fourth, services are often not well integrated with one another and are therefore unable to provide cohesive support to families
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- Seventh, the service system does not maintain continuous contact with families of young children during the early years
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- Tenth, many people working with children and families have not had opportunities to learn about recent early childhood research findings
- Finally, many people working with children and families have not been trained in ways of working with families

SYSTEMIC ISSUES IN PROVIDING SERVICES TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

- Government departments, research disciplines and service sectors tend to work in 'silos', despite there being strong arguments for greater service integration and a 'whole of government' approach to service delivery
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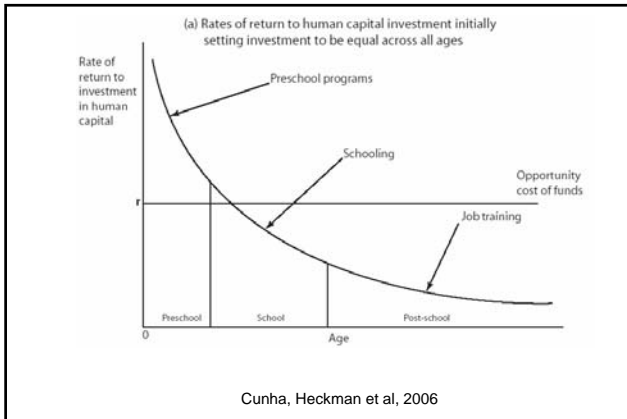
SYSTEMIC ISSUES IN PROVIDING SERVICES TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES (cont)

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- Most specialist intervention services are already underfunded, and it is looking increasingly unlikely that they can ever be fully funded in their present forms

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'HARD-TO-REACH' FAMILIES

All services are reporting an increase in the proportion of families who have multiple problems. Formal professional services are not very successful in engaging such families, for a variety of reasons:

- Such families lack strong links with their local communities
- They do not know how to negotiate with services to get what they want, or even to find out what they are entitled to
- They may have difficulties accessing services because of lack of money or transport
- They may not be comfortable with the formal tone of many of the services
- They may have had very poor experiences with professional services previously

These families are the ones who are most at risk of poor developmental outcomes for their children, and poor health and mental health outcomes for the parents.

RESEARCH FINDINGS ABOUT FAMILY FUNCTIONING

KEY FACTORS AFFECTING FAMILY FUNCTIONING

- **Social support** or **personal support networks** refer to the people in our lives, usually our family and friends, who are the most immediate sources of emotional and practical support.
- **Social connectedness** or **social capital** refer to the nature of the linkages within communities, which can vary according to the general level of trust and reciprocity in the relationships between members of the community.
- **Social infrastructure** refers to the facilities and services available to families, and the nature of the built environment in which they live.

All three of these factors are known to direct or indirect effects on the functioning of individuals, families and communities.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

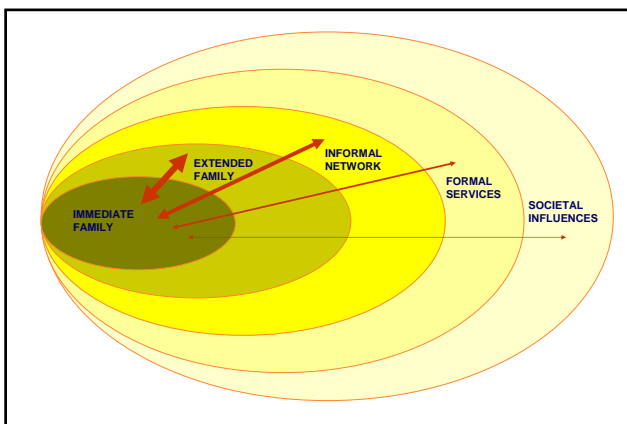
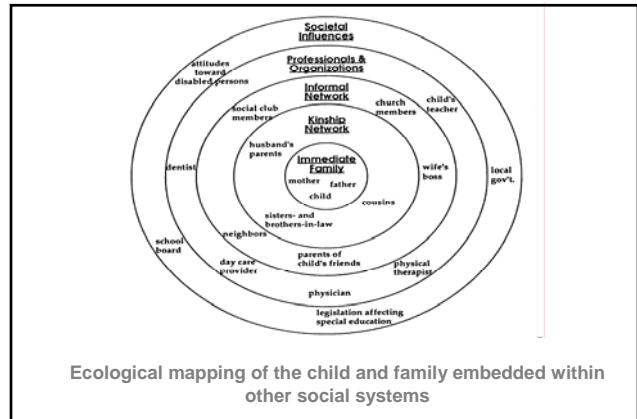
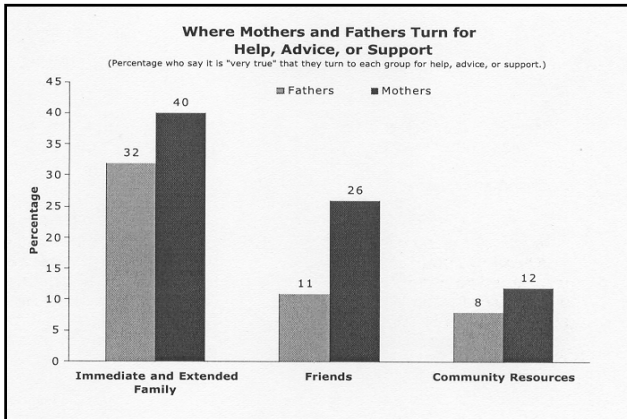
Social support or **personal support networks**

- These refer to the people in our lives, usually our family and friends, who are the most immediate sources of emotional and practical support.
- The strength of people's personal support networks varies according how many people they have in their social network, what sort of tangible support they provide, and how often they see them.

KEY FEATURES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

- Social support can have both direct and indirect influences on child development and behaviour
- The nature and extent of families' personal support networks have been shown to be linked with a wide range of parental and family outcomes
- These include low birthweight, child abuse, child neglect, maternal adjustment, maternal mental health, and maternal physical health
- Social support can be provided by both informal and formal social network members, that is, by family and friends, or by service providers.
- Informal support has a greater influence on the personal functioning of parents than formal support

... cont



KEY FEATURES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT (cont)

- Whether support provided by professionals has the same beneficial effects depends upon whether the support offered matches the parents' needs – when it does not match, the support is experienced negatively
- Whether support provided by professionals has the same beneficial effects also depends upon the nature of the relationship between parents and the professionals: the more that parents perceive professionals as being part of their informal social network, then the more likely they are to consult them or seek their support

... cont

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social connectedness or social capital

- These refer to the nature of the linkages within communities, which can vary according to the general level of trust and reciprocity in the relationships between members of the community.
- Both social support and social capital affect the functioning and well-being of individuals, families and communities.

When social capital is high and communities are well-connected, children and families benefit in a number of direct and indirect ways: 'All families ... need access to information that helps them gain a realistic understanding of their child's development and of the possible impact of developmental changes on family life.' (Fegan and Bowes, 1999)

In well-connected communities, families have many opportunities for 'incidental encounters with other children and other parents within the local neighbourhood, encounters that can provide such information, reduce the intensity of uncertainty and alleviate parental anxiety.' (Fegan and Bowes, 1999)

SOCIAL CAPITAL (cont)

Families of young children need multiple opportunities to meet with and establish mutually supportive relationships with other families of young children.

- Unless they establish such links, a collective view of their service needs is unlikely to develop.
- There needs to be a critical mass of community members having frequent contact with one another
- Parents need lots of opportunities for random encounters with other parents of young children
- Families need urban environments that are easy to navigate and that provide lots of opportunities for random encounters between people in the community

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Social infrastructure refers to the facilities and services available to families, and the nature of the built environment in which they live.

- **Facilities** include parks, adventure playgrounds, libraries, swimming pools and shopping centres
- **Services** include transport as well as formal and informal universal and specialist child and family services
- The **built environment** includes roads and footpaths, the connectivity and permeability of street layouts, and the accessibility of services and facilities

All three of these forms of social infrastructure impact have direct and indirect effects upon family functioning and child rearing.

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE (cont)

Key features of social infrastructure that impact on families

Facilities

- the number and range of facilities in the neighbourhood
- how child- and family-friendly they are
- how safe they are
- what they cost to use
- how easy they are to get to

Services

- the availability and reliability of public transport
- the number and range of child and family services in the neighbourhood
- how family-centred they are
- what they cost to use
- how easy they are to get to

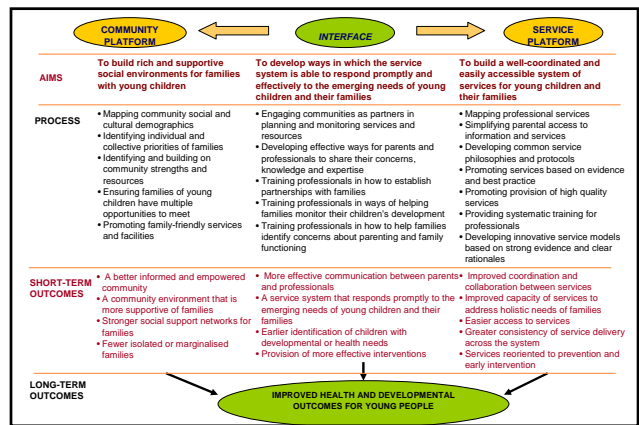
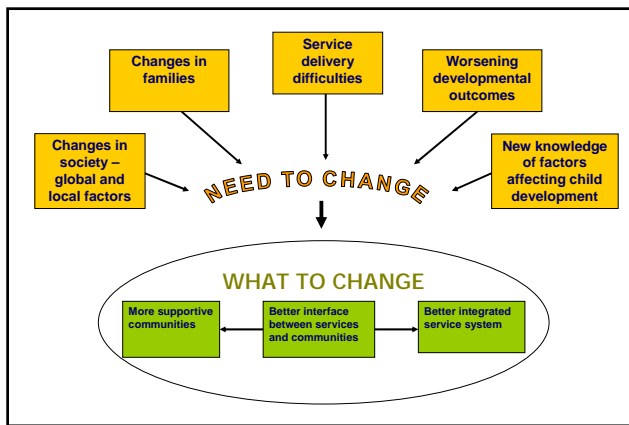
SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE (cont)

Key features of social infrastructure that impact on families

The built environment

- the provision of footpaths that allow safe and pleasant walking access to facilities and services
- the degree to which the configuration of streets allows many different routes to facilities and services
- the location of the facilities and services within 'pram-pushing' distance of where families live

A key feature of the social infrastructure for families of young children is the existence of various places where they can meet other families of young children.



KEY MESSAGES

- All forms of child and family services are struggling to meet the needs of eligible families, and may therefore be regarded as being under-funded
- The cost of fully funding all these services in their present form may be prohibitive
- None of this is necessarily the result of bad policies or government neglect – it is more the outcome of economic and social change, as well as the unintended consequences of policies that have proved remarkably successful in other ways
- We do not do a good job of engaging and supporting families who are marginalised and poorly resourced, especially our indigenous population

KEY MESSAGES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

What early childhood educators provide is profoundly important for children, their families and the wider society

- Nevertheless, the early childhood education field needs to be actively engaged in the process of rethinking of how child and family services can best support families of young children
- Exactly how early childhood services need change is still to be determined, although some aspects are clear, including
 - opening up services to greater parental involvement and parent / professional partnerships
 - establishing stronger links with other child and family services
 - breaking down the barriers between child care and education

IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD AND FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

We need to create the conditions that enable families to raise their children as they (and we) would wish. This includes the following:

- We need to provide families of young children with multiple opportunities to meet with other families with young children
- We need urban environments that are easy to navigate and that provide lots of opportunities for random encounters between people in the community.
- We should provide families of young children with easy access to family-friendly settings where they can meet other families.
- We should be providing isolated families with help in establishing supportive personal support networks.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD AND FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES (cont)

We should provide families with high quality, universally available and easily accessible mainstream and specialist services. This includes the following:

- We need to provide a range of high quality universal services (including a kindergarten year or its equivalent for all children)
- We need to ensure that these services are easily accessible to all families – financially (which may mean restoring full funding for kindergartens), geographically, and family-friendly
- We need a better integrated service system that is easy to access and flexible enough to respond holistically to the emerging needs of children and families.
- We need to restructure our services so as to be able to respond to the emerging needs of children and families
- We need to break down barriers between services, between family and work, and between schools and communities

IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD AND FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES (cont)

We should engage communities as partners in our collective efforts to support families with young children. This includes the following:

- We should seek to create the conditions under which communities can determine their own collective needs.
- We need to develop our skills in working with communities, ie. community-centred practice
- We need to adopt a family-centred approach to community building, with the ultimate aim of becoming a community in which the economic, physical, and social environment enhances the well-being of the children and families living in it

Above all, we need a paradigm shift in how we fund and deliver services to families and young children, and how services and governments relate to families and communities.

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