

Parent engagement and participation approaches in child protection

Executive Summary

This evidence summary highlights the findings of a literature review conducted in September 2020 by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare in partnership with The University of Melbourne.

The findings of this review contribute to the work of the Voice of Parents, a two-year project led by the Centre, supported by Gandel Philanthropy and Equity Trustees. The Voice of Parents continues the Centre's commitment to promoting client voice and learning from those with lived experience to achieve better outcomes for children and support parents in their critical role in their child's life.

The literature review can be accessed [here](#).

Key Findings

- Meaningful parent engagement in child protection is achievable and leads directly to better outcomes for children, young people and their families.
- Employing effective engagement strategies while simultaneously addressing the known barriers to engagement provides families the opportunity to take ownership of and participate in real and sustainable change and ultimately strengthens the family unit.
- To support genuine and meaningful engagement services require a skilled and culturally competent workforce who understand the intersectionality of challenges and discrimination that specific parent populations experience.
- While there are many innovative approaches which improve participation and enhance the engagement of parents in child protection, there is limited evidence of parents being directly engaged in the design and development of new practice models.

Context

Meaningful and genuine parent participation in decision-making is linked to a range of increased positive outcomes for children and their families, especially in relation to development, wellbeing, identity, and sense of belonging (AIHW, 2015). Victorians' concern about the safety and welfare of children resulted in reports to statutory child protection in the last decade almost tripling, from less than 42,000 in 2007-08 to more than 115,000 in 2017-18 (CCYP, 2019, p 13).

This trajectory is forecasted to continue with the ever-increasing public awareness of child abuse and neglect and the impact of family violence, and the expansion of mandatory reporting (CCYP, 2019, p 13).

As more Victorian families become engaged with the Child and Family Services System the importance of hearing parents' voice, understanding what matters to families, and embedding a model for parents' participation is critical to improving outcomes for children and young people.

Effective engagement strategies

The review found five key strategies that supported effective engagement. Summarised below, these strategies range from the practitioner level interaction to workforce approaches.

Demonstrate respect

Respectful relationships are the cornerstone to meaningful engagement.

Respect in action looks like:

- Treating parents, the same no matter their race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, size, age, disability, or country of origin
- Allowing parents to freely express themselves and their ideas with confidence that they will be listened to
- Disputes and disagreements are resolved in a constructive, healthy, and safe way
- Parents are treated impartially and without bias

Communicate clearly

Effective communication is fundamental to meaningful engagement.

For communication to be effective, it must be:

- Clear
- Easy to understand
- Transparent

Practitioners must actively listen to and act on the voice of parents.

Adopt a strengths-based approach

A strength-based approach operates from the assumption that all people have some strengths and resources which they can draw from to make positive change, even if they are experiencing difficulties.

A strengths-based approach:

- Values parents as individuals with their own strengths and resources
- Draws on existing strengths and resources to promote action
- Recognises varying access to resources
- Focuses on what individuals and communities can do
- Informs learning
- Builds necessary skills to develop capacity to act

Understand and address parental needs

- Assess parental needs early and provide timely referral for support
- Needs assessment must consider a parent's individual context, history, and circumstances
- Be aware of specific barriers impacting parents with complex needs and ensure implications are considered in everyday practice, engagement, and planning

Develop a competent workforce

Competency is the ability to perform a range of activities in a specific occupational or vocational area, transfer skills and knowledge to new situations, and to manage a wide range of tasks within a job (Child Protection Practice Manual, DHHS, 2020).

Cultural competence is a core capability for child protection practitioners. Regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the benefits of cultural competence include greater engagement with these communities and better, immediate, and future outcomes for Aboriginal children and families. These benefits extend to all Culturally and Linguistically Diverse families.

To ensure the development of a competent workforce, an organisation should consider the following strategies:

- Allocate the most complex cases to the most experienced practitioners
- Provide thorough induction training for all new practitioners and assess proficiency prior to case allocation
- Provide ongoing competency-based training and professional development opportunities for all staff. This supports and informs a learning culture
- Provide ongoing individual and group supervision to support practitioners in their competency and learning journey

Barriers to effective engagement

The review found that factors that act as barriers to engagement could be grouped into 3 key themes: parent factors, practitioner factors, and system factors.

Parent Factors



Complexity of parental needs

Parents who encounter the child protection system have complex needs, and many live with social, economic, and structural disadvantage (Bromfield et al., 2012).



Power

The inherent power imbalance between parent and practitioner has been identified as a significant factor that shapes the experience families have with the system.



Fear and distrust

Parents are very cognisant of the power that practitioners have, this can evoke considerable fear and distrust towards them.



Shame and stigma

Experiencing both shame and stigma is a common experience for families in contact with child protection intervention (Hall, Price-Roberston, & Awram, 2020).

Practitioner Factors



Judgemental attitudes towards parents

Negative practitioner attitudes towards parents have emerged as a significant barrier to parent engagement. When parents perceive that their practitioner does not like them, or has judged them poorly, this is directly related to lower rates of engagement for the parent (Poirier & Simard, 2006).



Professional and personal bias

A prevalent bias that can occur in child protection practice relates to assumptions of care. Recognising the inextricable relationship between parenting and assumptions of care is critical for effective engagement, particularly if parents believe their worker perceives them as 'bad'. This is a specific example of the intersectionality for parents, bias, and gender norms/roles.

Systemic Factors



Time constraints

The organisational conditions in which practitioners must carry out their work is highly prescriptive, and as such can subsequently impact a practitioner's capacity to effectively work with parents and achieve meaningful engagement.



Dealing with multiple professionals

The nature of front-line child protection work is highly stressful, emotionally demanding and can lead to vicarious trauma for some professionals. Such factors contribute to organisations consistently experiencing significant turnover and staff shortages, which can in turn create adverse working cultures and practices. This directly impacts and impairs the engagement process.

Engagement barriers for specific populations

The review examined engagement barriers experienced by several populations who have experienced systemic disadvantage.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' over-representation in child protection is complex and multifaceted and its continuation has been attributed to ongoing and pervasive systemic disadvantage and oppression. Cultural competency and sensitivity was critical for working with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander parents, as well as an understanding of the historical factors that affect Aboriginal communities and the specific barriers that impact engagement.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse families

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families face specific barriers relating to communication, language, and institutional knowledge of child protection intervention. Practitioners must recognise the stressors that may compromise safety and identify these as needs that require support, rather than attributing them to the misconception of cultural norms. The review found gaps in current literature regarding CALD families' experiences of contact with child protection intervention in Australia and its prevalence. Despite these gaps there is growing body of evidence for effective strategies for engagement specific to CALD families, including a clear understanding of cultural history, experiences and customs.

Fathers and the implication of family violence

Despite the recognition that children experience fundamental benefits when their fathers engage, the review found that there remains limited participation of fathers in child protection intervention comparatively with mothers (Clapton, 2017). The reluctance of practitioners to actively engage fathers may be intimately tied to issues of family violence perpetrated by men. In cases where there are ongoing patterns of intimate partner violence, practitioners – who are predominantly women – may not feel safe in contacting fathers (Brown et al., 2009). The Centre acknowledges that women can also be the perpetrators of violence, although this is less commonly reported. The literature reviewed for this report discussed the implication of violence perpetrated by fathers.

Young parents

Young parenthood is associated with several adversities and challenges, including socio-economic disadvantage, experience of trauma, disengagement or under-achievement in education, engagement in high risk and antisocial behaviours and/or misuse of substances (Woodward, Howard & Fergusson, 2001). Understanding the biological, psychological, and social needs of young parents (and the context in which they present) are essential considerations for any engagement strategy.

Parents with complex needs

Parents encountering child protection intervention may present with complex needs, such as combinations of disability, mental illness (which may be categorised as a disability), and/or current (or historical) substance misuse. Complex needs require specific approaches to engagement to ensure efficacy and appropriateness of interventions.

It is vital for organisations to promote understanding of the above and provide opportunities for training and development of the skills necessary to assess and identify these needs at the earliest point in child protection intervention to address this disadvantage.

Method

A systematic scoping approach was taken to identify and review the literature on models where the voice and experiences of parent(s) have been actively and intentionally sought. To identify relevant sources, this review incorporated a wide range of national and international documents. The methods involved searching for academic peer-reviewed journals (both quantitative and qualitative), and literature primarily in the forms of government reports, briefing papers, scoping reviews, and practice materials.

Implications for parent participation in model development, design and implementation

The literature review included both national and international models and broader approaches which support effective parent participation. When effective engagement approaches are incorporated into practice, parents were more responsive and receptive to intervention, and had a greater capacity to build meaningful and effective relationships with practitioners and service providers. Such approaches were also identified as core strategies used in the review of effective models.

These participation approaches demonstrate clear strategies for effectively working with families that can enhance parent engagement. Furthermore, when barriers are concurrently (i.e. multiple barriers that are addressed simultaneously), parents have greater opportunity for genuine participation and meaningful engagement, directly contributing to better outcomes for children, young people, and their families. literature primarily in the forms of government reports, briefing papers, scoping reviews, and practice materials.

The models in which parents were directly consulted throughout the design and development were also identified as being the most effective in improving participation and engagement. These models were the most favoured by parents and practitioners and most importantly lead to the most improved outcomes. These included positive, sustainable change for children, young people and their families.

More information

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Disclaimer

The material in this evidence summary and in the original literature review is the responsibility of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. This review of the evidence was published in September 2020, however readers should note additional resources and evidence that may have arisen since completion of this review.

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