

Voice of Parents sector survey report

Survey of child and family service worker
experiences of engaging birth parents

March 2021

**ARTHUR GORDON OLDHAM
CHARITABLE TRUST**

managed by  Equity Trustees



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About the Voice of Parents: a Model for Inclusion Project

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. Representing over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals, the Centre advocates for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. Our vision is to see a community that is fair, equitable and creates opportunities for children and their families to live happy and health lives.

 [@CentreForExcellenceInChildAndFamilyWelfare](https://www.facebook.com/CentreForExcellenceInChildAndFamilyWelfare)

 [@CFEFCFW](https://twitter.com/CFEFCFW)

 www.cfecfw.asn.au

The Voice of Parents: a Model for Inclusion Project

Through the support of Gandel Philanthropy and Equity Trustees - The Arthur Gordon Oldham Charitable Trust, the Centre is leading the Voice of Parents project, which aims to develop an evidence and lived experience informed systemic approach to parental participation. The project will develop a Charter of Parental Participation and a Parental Participation Model and Toolkit, which will provide foundational principles and practical resources that are culturally sensitive and adaptable to a variety of contexts, during and post completion of the project. These resources will be used by the government and the child and family services sector across Victoria for the inclusion of parents' voice in their work.

For updates on the Voice of Parents project, visit www.cfecfw.asn.au/voice-of-parents

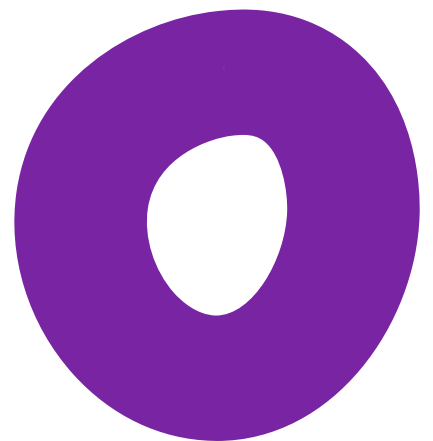


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Acknowledgements

The Centre is grateful for the time and expertise of sector professionals who participated in this survey. Your insights help to build our collective knowledge on engaging with parents and will be a valuable contribution to this project. In applying this knowledge in the Voice of Parents project, we aim to improve parental engagement across the service sector and achieve better outcomes for children and young people in Victoria.



Executive Summary

Overview

In November 2020, the Voice of Parents: a Model for Inclusion project surveyed Victorian child and family service professionals who have experience in engaging with birth families. The survey aimed to help us better understand the opportunities and challenges professionals face in engaging with birth parents. This report details the kind of roles these professionals work in, the services their organisations provide, and their experiences of engaging parents.

Insights from the survey, in addition to other project activities such as a literature review and an upcoming lived experience parent advisory group, will help to develop a framework for parents' voices to be heard in a more systemic way. This will be achieved through the development of a Charter of Parental Participation, an agreed set of principles that can be applied across organisations and programs in the child and family services sector, and a Parent Participation Model (with a practical toolkit of resources). These resources will be used by government and the child and family services sector across Victoria for the inclusion of parents' voice in their work.

The survey

The survey was completed by 107 sector professionals, ranging from frontline workers to managers in organisations providing services such as child protection, out-of-home care, early intervention, family services, health services and family violence services. The survey asked professionals a range of questions about their views on how birth parents are currently engaged with child and family welfare organisations in Victoria.

Key findings

This survey adds to the growing body of evidence on engaging with birth parents in the child and family service sector, providing further context to the barriers and facilitators of effective engagement for Victorian parents, practitioners, organisations and service systems. Key findings include:

- Including parents in service planning and delivery is often in the best interest of the child, and the child's needs and wants are frequently aligned with those of their parents.
- Parent participation can help to build common goals in service planning and their engagement can increase the chance of intervention success.
- A trusting relationship between parents and workers that is meaningful and sustainable is critical to engagement.
- Parent participation should occur from the beginning of the process and the goals of engagement should be frequently revisited.
- Engagement with parents should be warm, persistent, strengths-based and transparent. It should also be flexible and long-term where possible.

Organisational and systemic barriers

- lack of time
- lack of funding
- lack of service flexibility
- need for more support for genuine engagement

Parental barriers to engagement

- complexity of circumstances
- practical barriers such as lack of money or transport
- feelings of shame, stigma and fear
- a misconception of services being a statutory authority (i.e., able to remove their children)

Practitioner barriers to engagement

- lack of training and knowledge in engaging parents
- personal bias towards birth parents
- lack of guidance
- difficulty engaging parents with challenging or violent behaviours

Many professionals felt their organisation could do more to proactively engage parents. Suggestions to improve opportunities for engagement included earlier intervention for families, long-term support for parents, relief from administrative burdens and pressure to meet targets, and increased information sharing between services.

The survey will be followed by a period of co-design consultations with parents who have lived experience of the service system in Victoria.

Introduction

In November 2020, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) surveyed Victorian child and family service professionals to better understand the opportunities and challenges they face in engaging parents. This survey is part of the initial phase of the Voice of Parents project.

The survey asked professionals for their views on how birth parents are currently engaged with child and family welfare organisations in the sector. It explored what works to engage parents, and what the barriers might be to greater participation of parents embedded in the service system. The survey was distributed to professionals online, to be completed remotely and at the discretion of staff. The survey responses were analysed to identify key themes and relevant findings, detailed below.

This report outlines the results of the survey and provides an overview of what this means for the project and the sector. The report aims to provide insights into parent engagement in the current service environment, highlighting the gaps in our knowledge and exploring how we can use this information to improve outcomes for Victorian children and families. These insights will be relevant to professionals working with parents who are in contact with the child protection system. It will also help to inform the Voice of Parents project, co-designing a model for greater parental inclusion and genuine participation in the child and family service system.

An important value to keep in mind as we undertake this critical work with parents (as one survey respondent said):

“Parents are human beings and should be respected for their role. Kindness, respect and compassion will go a long way to protect our children and families.”

About the Voice of Parents project

The Voice of Parents project is a two-year project led by the Centre, supported by Gandel Philanthropy and Equity Trustees – The Arthur Gordon Oldham Charitable Trust.

As an ever-increasing number of Victorian parents are engaged with the child and family services system, and with the impacts of COVID-19 set to create even more pressure, hearing parents’ voice and embedding a model for parents’ participation is critical to improving outcomes for families and enabling children to thrive.

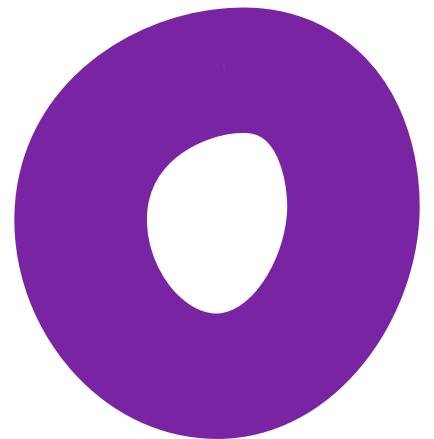
The Voice of Parents project will develop a framework for parent voices to be heard through a Charter of Parental Participation, an agreed set of principles that can be applied across organisations and programs in the child and family services sector, and a Parent Participation Model (with a practical toolkit of resources). These resources will be used by government and the child and family services sector across Victoria for the inclusion of parents’ voice in their work.

Key definitions for this report

- **Parents:** Refers to the birth or biological parent/s of a child or young person. Specifically, ‘parents’ in this report refers to those who are engaged in child and family welfare services through contact with the child protection system in Victoria.
- **Professionals:** Refers to a range of professionals in the child and family service system who have exposure to engagement with birth parents. This could include staff doing direct client

work (e.g., social workers, youth workers, child protection workers), team leaders and senior managers.

- **Engagement:** Refers to the establishment of effective relationships so there can be a shared understanding of goals and a shared commitment to supporting the child/young person and family to realise these goals.
- **Sector:** Refers to the Victorian child and family service sector, including services that provide child protection, family support and out of home care support.



About the survey

Method

The survey was designed to explore the opportunities and challenges involved for organisations in embedding a systematised approach to parental engagement and participation. Questions were developed in collaboration with case managers and social workers. After providing demographic information, professionals were asked to read 10 statements regarding engagement with birth parents in the child and family service sector and respond on a 5-point Likert scale to indicate their level of level of agreement. Responses on the 5-point scale included Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. Survey participants were invited to expand on their responses using a free text space after each of these statements. The remaining 5 questions in the survey then ask professionals to simply comment on questions regarding the facilitation of successful engagement with parents.

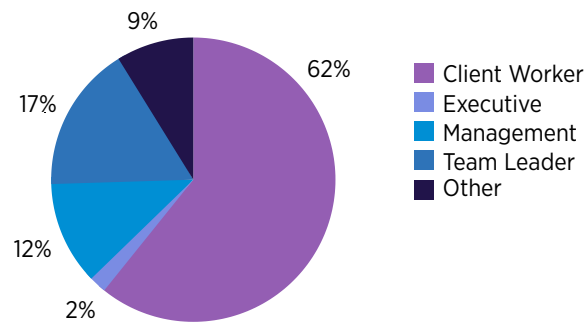
The survey was disseminated to child and family service sector professionals in November 2020. In particular, the survey targeted professionals who work closely with Victorian parents who have had contact with the statutory child protection system. The survey was disseminated via the Centre's social media platforms including LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter and newsletters. In addition to this promotion, the Centre's key industry networks were also utilised. This dissemination strategy was used to ensure a greater reach of professionals were aware of the survey and could share their views. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous, with minimal identifying details asked beyond their role and service type.

Overview of results

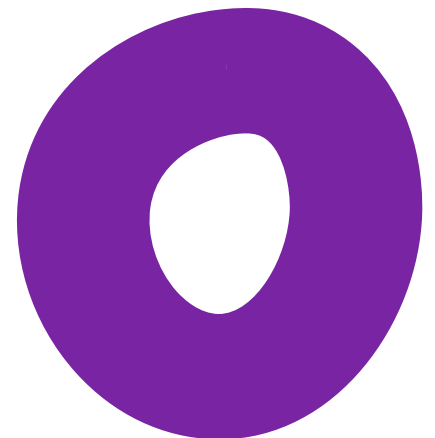
- 107 completed responses from sector professionals.
- Survey respondents were in organisations providing services such as:
 - Out-of-home care
 - Early intervention and prevention
 - Child protection
 - Family services
 - Early learning and education
 - Health services
 - Family violence services
- Survey respondents were predominantly working in roles identified as:
 - Client Worker
 - Management
 - Team Leader (see Figure 1 for a breakdown of roles identified).

Figure 1: Description of roles identified by survey respondents

Which of the following best describes your role in your organisation?



Example responses listed in 'other' include Clinical Specialist, Family Project Worker and Social Worker.



Discussion of results

An overview of these results are discussed below; this section also incorporates quotes from the survey that are particularly insightful or meaningful for this project.

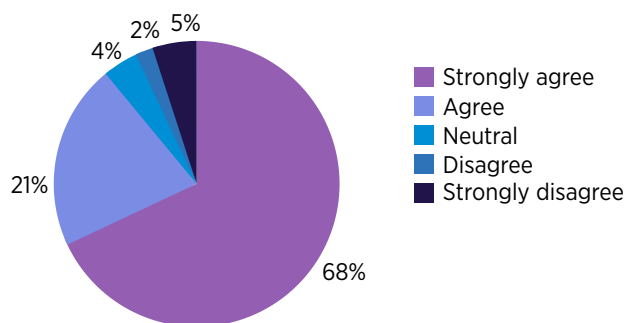
Is engagement with birth parents important and does it improve outcomes for children and young people?

Statement 1: It is important to consider the experiences and perspectives of birth parents in service planning and delivery.

Most professionals (89%) **agreed** or **strongly agreed** that it is important to consider the experiences and perspectives of birth parents in service planning and delivery (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Survey responses to Statement 1

It is important to consider the experiences and perspectives of birth parents in service planning and delivery



Common themes that emerged from responses that agreed it is important to consider the voice of birth parents included:

- it is often in the best interest of the child, from an attachment perspective and a development perspective,
- including parents in service delivery was especially relevant in services focused on reunification,
- families are acknowledged as life-long and influential relationships for children,
- children and young people often want to have a connection with their birth parents,
- parent participation helps to build common goals in service planning,
- engaging the family in service responses can increase the chance of intervention success,
- parents are the experts in their children's lives, and they have a right to be included and listened to.

Some respondents indicated that, while they agreed it was important to involve birth parents, this needed to be weighed up with the wellbeing, safety and best interest of the child.

Some professionals indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement for similar reasons, citing the need to uphold the young person (not the parent) as the primary client of the service and to consider whether parental inclusion is actually in the best interest of the child. Some respondents indicated that they would only involve the birth family at the child or young person's discretion.

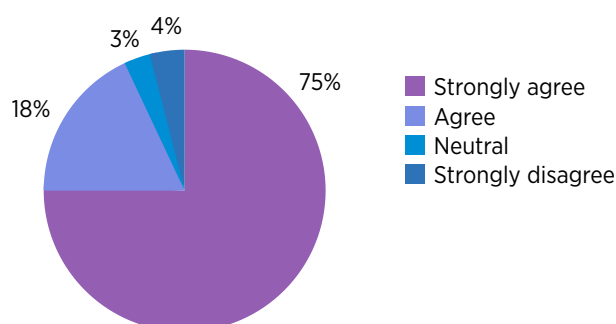
“Parents play a pivotal role in their children’s lives, their views and wishes should always be taken into account. However, the decision will always lay with the best interests of the child.”

Statement 2: When parents are meaningfully engaged with services there are better outcomes for children and young people.

Most professionals (93%) agreed or strongly agreed that children and young people experience better outcomes when their birth parents are meaningfully engaged with services (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Survey responses to Statement 2¹

When parents are meaningfully engaged with services there are better outcomes for children and young people



Although this survey is limited in its capacity to assess the evidence of improved outcomes for children and young people, the high proportion of professionals engaged in this work who believe that parent participation leads to better outcomes is worthy of note. Professionals in this field have a wealth of knowledge that can be drawn on, in combination with rigorous evidence (which does suggest that engagement with parents can lead to better outcomes), to inform best practice.

Many responses to this statement highlighted the importance of a trusting relationship between parents and services to improve outcomes for children and young people. The ability of a service or worker to support a meaningful and sustainable working relationship with parents was also identified.

¹ No survey respondents indicated they “disagree” with this statement.”

“Engagement in itself requires courage and persistence often in the face of significant obstacles. Services need to understand that.”

Professionals indicated that they saw improved outcomes for children and young people through a variety of mechanisms, because of improved engagement with birth parents. Examples of this included:

- parents having a more positive attitude towards services that listen to them, leading to better engagement.
- when parents feel supported, they may be in a better position to support their children.
- an improved relationship between parents and carers can support positive child outcomes.
- stigma and negative parenting behaviours can be challenged in a respectful relationship with a worker, which can reduce the impact on children and young people.

Several responses indicated the importance of services being suitable for the family and their needs. Responses that were neutral or in strong disagreement with this statement noted that engagement with birth parents could be unhelpful at times or even restrictive (see Statement 8 for insights into parental barriers to engagement). However, this represented a small percentage of the responses. A number of responses highlighted the need for frontline workers to have more time and skills to meaningfully engage with parents as part of their roles.

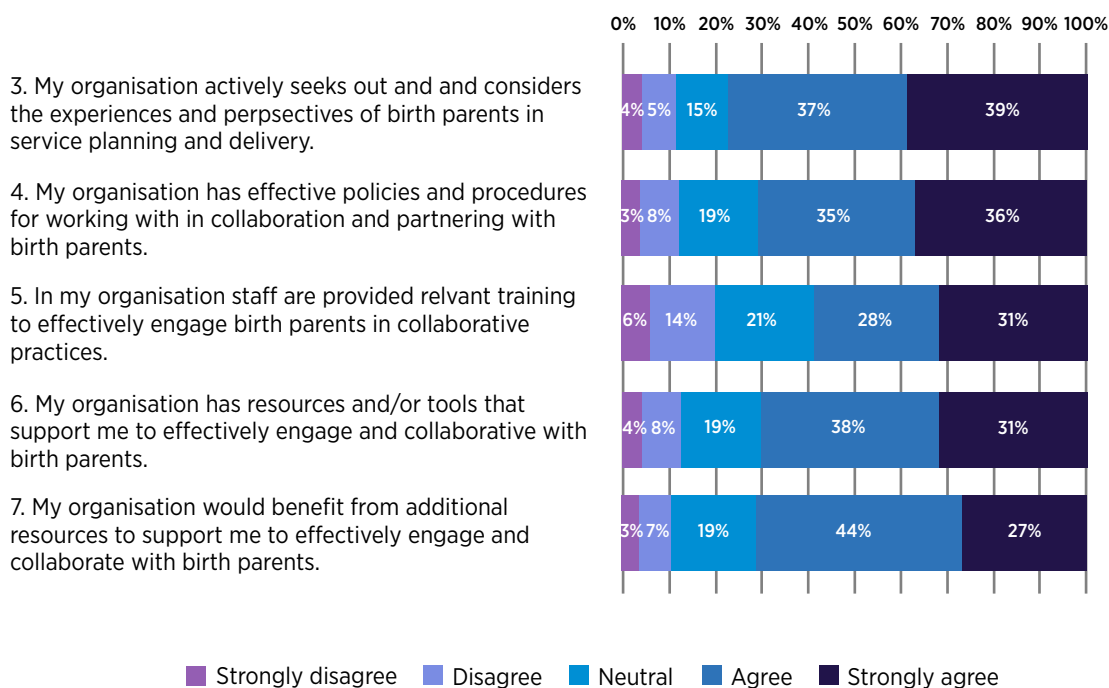
How are organisations engaging with parents?

Statements 3-7 in the survey asked professionals to identify their level of agreement with statements about their organisational culture when it comes to engaging with parents. Figure 4 shows the percentage of survey respondents (n=107 in total) who either agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- 3) My organisation actively seeks out and considers the experiences and perspectives of birth parents in service planning and delivery.
- 4) My organisation has effective policies and procedures for working in collaboration and partnering with birth parents.
- 5) In my organisation staff are provided relevant training to effectively engage birth parents in collaborative practices.
- 6) My organisation has resources and/or tools that support me to effectively engage and collaborate with birth parents.
- 7) My organisation would benefit from additional resources to support me to effectively engage and collaborate with birth parents.

Figure 4: Survey responses to Statements 3-7²

Survey responses to statements about organisational culture and parental engagement



Statement 3: My organisation actively seeks out and considers the experiences and perspectives of birth parents in service planning and delivery.

Almost 80% of professionals agreed that their organisation actively seeks out and considers the experiences and perspectives of birth parents in service planning and delivery. Several professionals commented that, while they agreed with the statement, engagement with parents could be based on the commitment of an individual practitioner and it was not necessarily embedded into the service.

Many respondents indicated that their organisation could do more to actively engage birth parents (including engaging with parents earlier in the process). Some professionals noted that engagement with parents was at the discretion of the child or young person.

Professionals who felt their organisation did actively seek out and consider the views of birth parents spoke of common themes, such as:

- the importance of parental engagement in service delivery,
- including parents from the beginning of service planning and delivery,
- ensuring parents felt heard and that they understood processes, their rights and their responsibilities,
- reviewing progress and goals throughout the process.

² the sum of percentages per statement may add up to more than 100% due to rounding of decimal values

Many responses to this statement also identified the barriers to parental engagement within their organisation. These will be incorporated in the results in Statement 9 which specifically explores organisational barriers.

“We always take the time in early commencement to obtain a broad range of information from the parents to help us understand what factors may be influencing their parenting capacity and functioning of the family.”

Statement 4: My organisation has effective policies and procedures for working in collaboration and partnering with birth parents.

Many professionals (71%) agreed that their organisation had effective policies and procedures for collaborating with birth parents. Professionals were asked to provide examples of these where possible; these responses were mixed, including both formal models of practice or programs and examples of effective practice policies for working with parents. Some specific examples included:

- Safe and Together model,
- Best Interests Case Practice model,
- Cradle to Kinder program,
- Integrated Family Services,
- ensuring parents are aware of their rights (e.g., to privacy, feedback),
- co-design approaches to working with parents (e.g., setting and meeting goals, care plans),
- family action plans,
- principles of inclusion in guiding frameworks (e.g., legislation, organisational policies),
- accessible information packages to explain the organisation’s role in the engagement process,
- having male workers to target fathers and their role within the family.

“Our organisation prides itself on working collaboratively and in partnership with all of our families with a large emphasis on parents being the expert of their own lives which can be seen embedded within organisational policy and practice.”

Several professionals who responded to this statement as neutral, disagree or strongly disagree highlighted a lack of clarity around the existence of policies and procedures to guide parental collaboration and partnerships, or the degree to which they are supposed to do this in their organisation. Some professionals felt that engaging with birth parents was not within the scope of their role, particularly if they were primarily working with children/young people and their carers.

The responses also highlighted that, even when organisational policies were in place, some professionals felt these could be improved upon or that they were difficult to implement due to systemic barriers.

Statement 5: In my organisation staff are provided relevant training to effectively engage birth parents in collaborative practices.

Professionals were divided in their experiences of organisational training in engaging parents. In response to this statement, 60% of professionals agreed that they were provided with relevant training in their organisation and 40% indicated they were neutral or in disagreement with this statement.

Some respondents said they utilised team meetings, communities of practice, or supervision to engage with their organisation on this topic when formal training was not available. The responses also highlighted that access to training could be dependent on having a ‘good’ manager or being in the ‘right’ office. High caseloads and time demands were seen as restricting opportunities for training. Some professionals noted the benefits of training that, while not specifically targeting the engagement of birth parents, supported better engagement in practice more generally (e.g., this could include training on motivational interviewing, effective communication). Many responses highlighted the desire for more and/or improved training, even when training had been made available.

A small percentage of respondents identified specific areas of training they would like to receive, which included cultural diversity in parental engagement, and working with parents who have challenging behaviour(s).

“It is essential staff are experienced and relevant training is also provided to all practitioners to ensure a consistent approach throughout all sites.”

Statement 6: My organisation has resources and/or tools that support me to effectively engage and collaborate with birth parents.

Many professionals agreed or strongly agreed (70%) that their organisation had the resources or tools to support them to effectively engage or collaborate with birth parents. As well as organisation-specific resources, some other examples included:

- child and family action plans,
- strength cards,
- DHHS resources,
- Parents Building Solutions program,
- Newborn Behavioural Observation program,
- Bringing Baby Home workshop,
- Baby Makes 3 program.

Some respondents indicated that organisational resources were further supported by access to professional development and/or secondary consultations.

Some respondents who were neutral or disagreed with this statement noted that resources were sourced and shared informally between colleagues, instead of via organisational channels. Others noted that resources were currently in development in their organisation, or that the ones they had needed updating or improving.

A lack of clear guidance was identified by one respondent and another suggested a sector wide response was needed to improve engagement across services.

No further detail was supplied by respondents who indicated they strongly disagreed with this statement.

“We have timeframes to meet and if families are not engaging in a timely manner we can close with them. We are a voluntary service (family services) and have families waiting for our services. Tools, discussions and trainings around how to actively engage parents is an area lacking in our program.”

Statement 7: My organisation would benefit from additional resources to support me to effectively engage and collaborate with birth parents.

Many professionals (71%) agreed or strongly agreed that their organisation would benefit from additional resources to support them to effectively engage and collaborate with birth parents.

Even where professionals responded neutrally to this statement, a number commented that they felt their organisation could benefit from additional resources. This indicates there could be a greater need for organisational resources than the overall 71% agreement figure suggests. Professionals who disagreed or strongly disagreed (10%) with this statement felt they were receiving adequate support from their organisation already, or that it was unnecessary due to the scope of their role.

Several professionals provided examples of beneficial resources that would support effective engagement and collaboration, including:

- practical resources, such as more time, staff and funding,
- resources to support engagement with parents who have low levels of literacy or for whom English is not their first language,
- resources that provide the most up-to-date evidence,
- extra training.

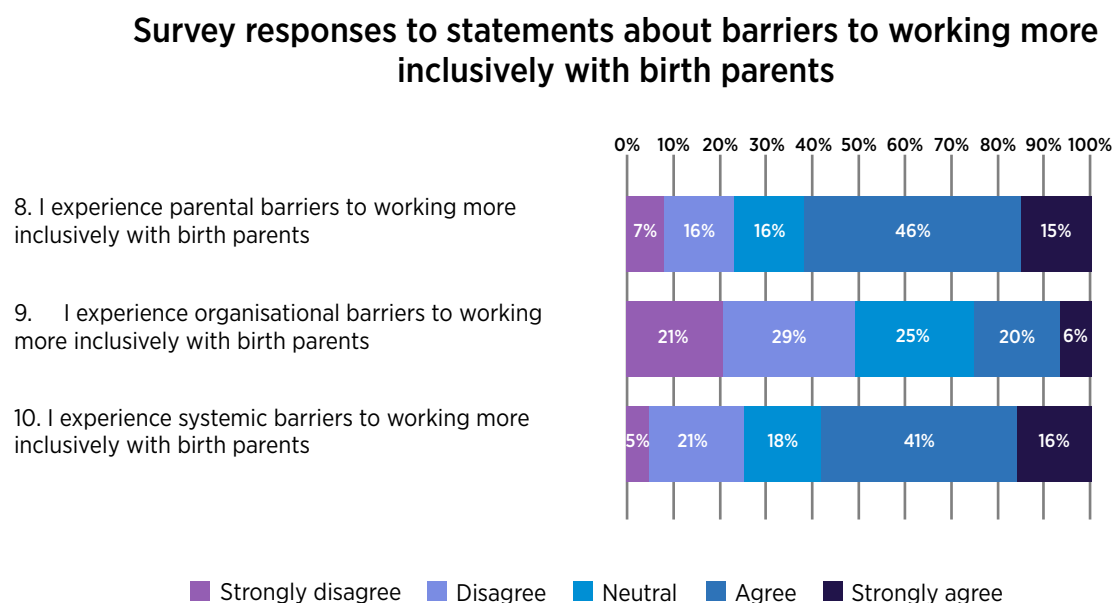
“I believe that it is necessary to continually update and refresh our knowledge with new and current information and resources which supports our work to engage and collaborate with birth parents”.

What are the barriers to engaging with parents?

Statements 8-10 in the survey asked professionals to identify their level of agreement with statements about the barriers they face when engaging parents. Figure 5 shows professionals' responses (and the breakdown of these responses) to the following statements:

- 8) I experience parental barriers to working more inclusively with birth parents.
- 9) I experience organisational barriers to working more inclusively with birth parents.
- 10) I experience systemic barriers to working more inclusively with birth parents.

Figure 5: Survey responses to Statements 8-10³



Statement 8: I experience parental barriers to working more inclusively with birth parents.

61% of professionals agreed or strongly agreed that they experience parental barriers to working more inclusively with birth parents. Many professionals who agreed with this statement highlighted the difficult relationship that can exist between child protection and birth parents. Parents could have high levels of anxiety with services they misunderstood to be related to child protection (e.g., other services run by DHHS⁴; family services). Parents not understanding the service system in general or even being 'over-serviced' by various organisations was also cited as a barrier to engagement.

"Often families engaged with DHHS experience fear and trust issues when working with services due to past experiences and struggle to engage or make meaningful change."

³ the sum of percentages per statement may add up to more than 100% due to rounding of decimal values.

⁴ Department of Health and Human Services; now referred to as the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH)

Many professionals identified feelings of fear or mistrust among parents as a barrier, often due to a fraught history with child protection or a fear that service engagement could lead to the removal of their child/ren. Engagement was identified as being particularly difficult for parents struggling with complex issues such as family violence, substance use or poor mental health. Complexity of circumstances can also reduce a parent's capacity to manage stressful situations such those that can be part of child protection involvement. Professionals noted that parents could struggle to engage with services due to feelings of shame, guilt, fear of judgment, and the power imbalance that exists between worker and client.

Professionals highlighted that parents may have difficulty engaging with services from a practical standpoint, grappling with issues such as financial constraints (e.g., money for transport), having no access to appropriate transport due to their geographic location, having inadequate housing or even being transient. Other circumstances affecting engagement could include worker fear of parents (e.g., a known perpetrator of family violence), or just general resistance from parents who may be angry, confused, using substances, or in disagreement that they need support.

Concerns were raised that some parents either do not agree or understand the impact their behaviour can have on child/ren. Other parents may not feel there are culturally safe or appropriate services they can access. Respondents highlighted that parents from a country other than Australia may fear services they perceive as authorities due to experiences of unrest or corruption in their home country.

Other parental barriers identified included an unwelcome environment for engagement (for example, having child visitations at a McDonald's) and the ability of workers to effectively engage with parents. One respondent commented that, due to the short-term nature of their service, parents did not have enough time to realistically achieve the goals of the service.

Many of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (23%) acknowledged similar barriers, however felt they were able to work through it, or that it was their responsibility to manage these barriers as the professional.

“We work hard to breakdown any barriers, we expect at the initial engagement stage that there will be some distrust or concerns from the parents, however we start from the get go with being honest and transparent with our families.”

Statement 9: I experience organisational barriers to working more inclusively with birth parents.

Half of the professionals in this sample disagreed or strongly disagreed (50%) that they experience organisational barriers to working more inclusively with birth parents. These professionals largely expressed that their organisation valued the engagement of parents and that workers were given space and the support to do this.

Overwhelming, professionals who agreed or strongly agreed (26%) that they do experience organisational barriers highlighted the lack of time available to them to effectively engage with parents, even when they wanted to. Some professionals who responded neutrally to the statement also commented that time and caseload pressures restricted their active engagement with parents. A number of professionals identified organisational culture as a barrier to engagement,

particularly within child protection, citing:

- pressure to work short or medium-term with families,
- a lack of flexibility in programs,
- a sense that the organisation undervalued parental engagement.

Additional barriers cited in response to this statement, as well as those mentioned throughout the survey, included:

- a focus on engagement with birth mothers and not birth fathers,
- some professionals felt it was not within the scope of their role and that engagement with birth parents was more aligned to child protection service,
- inconsistency of information provided by child protection about the parents,
- there may be safety issues to consider, for example if there is family violence,
- lack of policy framework, funding or practitioner confidence within the organisation to guide active engagement,
- practitioner resistance or poor attitudes towards birth parents.

“Parental engagement is encouraged at our organisation, however having sufficient time to be able to spend building trust to work with the birth parents is often challenging.”

Statement 10: I experience systemic barriers to working more inclusively with birth parents.

57% of professionals agreed or strongly agreed that they experience systemic barriers to working more inclusively with birth parents. Many of the systemic barriers identified by professionals overlap with organisational barriers; perhaps demonstrating that these barriers require attention from both perspectives.

The perceived systemic barriers to effective engagement also overwhelmingly related to professionals having inadequate time, resources, and funding. The structure of the child and family service system itself was also identified as restrictive to engagement, with professionals citing various difficulties such as:

- parental engagement being undervalued across the sector,
- the burden of time-intensive and non-inclusive bureaucratic processes (e.g., extensive forms that are difficult for clients to manage),
- excessive pressure to meet targets, including closing with families who may be initially resistant to engagement,
- difficulty engaging fathers, particularly when there is family violence,
- service limitations, often based on funding constraints (e.g., short-term service delivery models),
- rigidity of parenting paradigm (e.g., a lack of appreciation for culturally varied child-raising practices),

- difficulty accessing appropriate services (e.g., housing, NDIS, Centrelink, family violence prevention),
- parents over-engaged with multiple services,
- parents moving on from services after developing good relationships,
- ongoing structural changes to the system.

Some professionals who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (26%) once again acknowledged similar barriers however noted that these were simply part of their role to manage.

Question 11: Do you experience any other barriers to successful parental engagement?

Professionals were asked if they experienced any other barriers to successful parental engagement. Most of the responses echoed those previously identified in Statements 8, 9 & 10, however some additional barriers were identified, including those identified in Figure 6 below:

Figure 6: additional barriers identified

Additional barriers identified
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The impact of intergenerational trauma • A lack of empathy for families • Difference in workforce skill • COVID-19 related barriers (e.g., working with families virtually) • Deficit-focused practice with families • Burden on parents to re-tell their story to multiple workers • Unrealistic expectations of services • A lack of support for worker wellbeing • A lack of culturally diverse resources • Carers having poor experiences with birth parents and being reluctant to re-engage • No long-term capacity to follow up in services • Work hours contained to 9am-5pm

What helps to support successful engagement with parents?

Question 12: What strategies have you found to be successful in engaging birth parents?

Respondents provided a range of detailed strategies that they felt supported their successes in engaging parents. Many of the common themes in these responses have been discussed in previous sections of this report, however an overview of these will be discussed here.

Professionals highlighted that it was best to engage parents at a slow and gentle pace, where possible. This might include via warm referral, text messages or phone calls. Where engagement was hesitant, professionals found that being persistent yet warm and respectful helped to form a relationship, even if the first few contacts were just to provide a safe space for parents to talk or 'vent' their frustration about their experiences with the child and family service sector.

Understanding the parents' background was identified as important for effective engagement, including gaining insights into the family's history with the welfare system and understanding their experiences of the presenting issues.

Actively listening in a way that was non-judgemental, empathetic, and respectful of the parent's narrative was overwhelming important to professionals. Helping parents to voice their own needs and goals, and acknowledging them as the expert, was identified as critical to successful engagement.

Many respondents noted that professionals needed to be responsive to cultural differences (e.g., resources in other languages, utilising translators or mentors), understand mental health, and work within a strengths-based, relational framework. Some professionals responded that it was best to engage with all family members, and to be flexible in accommodating the family's needs (e.g., setting appropriate appointment times, adjusting the style of engagement to suit the family).

Other strategies included acknowledging the parents as valuable even if they are not engaging, keeping parents informed (e.g., about appointments, about their child where appropriate), offering practical support such as financial or transport assistance, referrals to services, and keeping regular contact with parents. This could be just to 'check-in' or to provide reminders or encouragement for appointments. Practical support like this can help to address some of the intersections of additional issues that parents may experience. Helping parents to see that there was a common goal of the child's wellbeing was important, and some professionals felt it useful to link in a parent's personal goals with their family or child/ren's goals.

Lastly, several professionals highlighted the importance of being patient, being understanding of the parent's challenges in engaging, being accepting of mistakes, and trying to remain engaged in a long-term capacity.

Question 13: How did you learn about these strategies?

Largely, professionals learned about effective engagement strategies through their job qualifications. Other learning pathways included peer-to-peer learning, client experience, organisational training and toolkit resources, and working directly with parent and family leaders. A small number of respondents said they did not have any strategies for successfully engaging birth parents.

Question 14: What programs/models are you aware of that support successful engagement with birth parents?

In addition to the programs and models listed in the response to Question 14, this table will include programs and models provided by professionals throughout the survey as successful examples⁵.

Figure 7: Programs and services identified

Programs and services identified	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independent Family Advocacy and Support, Victorian Legal Aid Parenting Assessment and Skills Development Services HIPPY Australia Healthy Happy Beginnings Cradle to Kinder Family Strengthening Task Force Family Services Communities for Children projects Drumbeat Parents Under Pressure Supported Playgroups Family Worx Anglicare 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grandmothers Against Removal Breaking the Cycle 200-hour Intensive Family Services Tuning into Teens VICSEG New Futures Group Pregnancy Care program Positive Parenting Program The Circle Program Breaking the Cycle Orange Door Circle of Security SafeCare Changing Futures program 1-2-3 Magic

Figure 8: Models and practices identified

Models and practices identified	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Motivational Interviewing OARS technique Family-centred approach Safe and Together model Working with the care team Strengths-based approach Dads Toolkit Parent peer educators and advocates Common elements approach Recovery model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Best Interests Framework Family Functional Therapy Family Functional Therapy-Child Welfare Multisystemic Therapy Family Partnership Training Parents Building Solutions Let's Talk About Children Trauma-informed practice Solihull approach

⁵ Examples provided are based on the opinion of the professional and may not be supported by program evaluation or evidence.

Question 15: What would help to improve and enhance engagement with birth parents within your organisation?

Professionals discussed a great number of ideas in response to the question: what would help to improve and enhance engagement with birth parents within your organisation? Again, many of the common themes in these responses have been discussed in previous sections of this report, however, an overview of these will be outlined here.

Professionals gave broad responses that repeated the need for more funding of services, more staff to share caseloads, and more time to genuinely engage with parents and form successful working relationships. It was noted that engagement with parents is supported by an overall valuing of lived experience and the ability to work at the pace of the parents. Professionals wanted more training, more resources and tools, and more practical strategies to support them in this work. Case studies were highlighted as useful to practitioners. Resources to give to parents were also wanted, and some professionals highlighted that these should be developed in conjunction with lived experience experts. Resources that were translated or more diversely accessible were also identified as needed.

Some suggestions to improve engagement included aspirational goals for the service system, for example:

- improved relationships between parents and carers,
- less pressure from child protection,
- earlier intervention,
- increased knowledge sharing between services,
- long-term support for parents after a child's removal,
- relief from administrative burdens.

Other suggestions were more practical, such as:

- more parenting support options,
- more mental health and trauma support services,
- joint visits with former workers,
- more communities of practice,
- increased clarity around how to engage with perpetrators of family violence.

One professional gave a great response: “asking the birth parents these questions”. This speaks to the fundamental value system and goal of the Voice of Parents project; to include the voices of parents in the future design and delivery of services; acknowledging their lived experience expertise by asking them the same kinds of questions this project asked professionals.

Analysis

Overall, the results of the survey demonstrate a commendable commitment to genuine parental engagement on behalf of many professionals in the Victorian child and family service sector. Meaningful engagement with birth parents demands a multifaceted approach; it requires skill and sensitivity from an individual practitioner, an authorising environment from the organisation, and a service system that values and promotes parental engagement as a core element of its work. Effective engagement also requires a willingness and vulnerability on behalf of the parents; it requires that they have an ability to develop trust and to be open to receiving support. As was highlighted over and over by survey respondents, the challenges of engagement that parents face in the service system cannot be overlooked, and organisations and professionals are tasked with providing non-judgemental, strengths-based, empathetic, and at times practical, support that empowers parents and breaks down barriers.

Family inclusivity

A family inclusive approach to child welfare is a “focus on the child in family rather than on child or family” (Ross, Cocks, Johnston & Stoker, 2017, p.54). In focusing on the child, it is important to remember that their needs, and frequently their wants, are not necessarily distinct from their families’ needs (Ross et al., 2017). The survey showed, however, that parents in the Victorian child and family service system face many barriers to engagement and more inclusive practice. This aligns with what we know from the research. Parental barriers identified in the Voice of Parents literature review included: the complexity of parental needs, the power imbalance between workers and parents, fear and distrust, and shame and stigma (The Centre & University of Melbourne, 2020). Practitioner barriers included judgemental attitudes towards parents and professional and personal bias; systemic barriers included time constraints and dealing with multiple professionals (The Centre & University of Melbourne, 2020). These (and others identified in this report) are barriers that require attention from the Voice of Parents project and the service sector more broadly.

Understanding the nature of services and the system

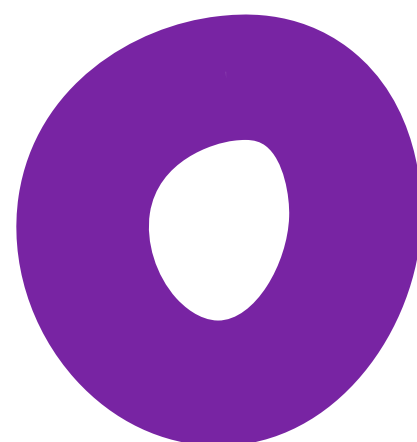
A continually emerging theme across the survey was the confusion that parents have about the organisation of services within the sector. Many respondents identified parents’ misconception about their service being related to child protection as barrier to engagement. Parents’ fear and distrust of child protection and of having their children removed can have far-reaching consequences that are significant barriers to engagement. Fear and distrust may be particularly heightened for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, impacted by a legacy of colonisation and intergenerational trauma due to systems like child protection. Parents may fear workers are colluding with child protection or ‘gathering information’ on them; they may have a traumatic history with child protection services (including an intergenerational history); they may have internalised stigma and shame about being a client and they may feel disempowered, hopeless, angry, or upset (Hall, Price-Robertson and Awram, 2020). As many survey respondents noted, they may also be suffering from ‘service fatigue’, being over-subscribed to services that are poorly coordinated or demanding unrealistic goals of parents.

Practical barriers also need to be considered at a systemic or organisation level when implementing engagement policies and processes. Being on a low income, for example, can restrict parents’ access to transport, stable housing, and can increase time pressures with Centrelink or other service commitments. This alone can make engagement difficult for parents even when the intention to commit is there. It can also quickly be compounded by other struggles parents might face such as trauma, substance use and mental health difficulties.

Impacts on child and family service workers

The survey findings also confirm the barriers to engagement faced by professionals. Without support from their organisation and the service system in general, genuine engagement can be difficult to achieve. The most common responses in the survey related to professionals' frustrations around the lack of time, the lack of resources and the lack of funding available for appropriate services. This is not new information; an abundance of literature highlights the sector's ongoing struggle with high service demand, staff turnover and the need to delay normal work activities in response to more crisis-oriented work (Victorian Auditor-General's Report, 2018). While waiting for systemic changes, however, workers in the child and family service sector need support for how to best operate within the current system.

The survey results have a number of implications for the Voice of Parents project.



What does this mean for the Voice of Parents project?

This survey adds to the growing body of evidence on engaging with birth parents in the child and family service sector. In addition to the literature review published by this project in September 2020, the results of this survey give further context to the barriers and facilitators of effective engagement for Victorian parents, practitioners, organisations, and service systems.

It will be important for this project to understand and approach parents as experts, to provide an accessible and safe platform for them to share their experiences, and to listen to them with respect. Parents need to be acknowledged as still being parents and as critical people in their child's life, even if the child is not currently in their care. Facilitators and practitioners will need to avoid overt displays of power and expertise and be acutely aware of the potential for subconscious bias. When the project develops a model to support more a systemic inclusion of parents, it may be useful to consider birth parents as core clients as much as children and young people (where it is appropriate and there are no safety limitations). There should be iterative opportunities for parents to provide feedback on the progression of the participation model and of any resources being developed, to ensure engagement is genuine and meaningful.

The survey showed that many professionals see engaging with birth parents as a part of their work with children/young people. A small number of professionals (largely working in out-of-home care) indicated that it was not part of their role. Reasons cited included that their work was led by the child or young person, or that their work mainly focused on the child's carers or guardians, not birth parents. Similarly, there were some conflicting opinions about involving both the birth parents and the carers or guardians in case planning opportunities. This could be due to organisational policy or individual practitioner judgement. Evidence supports the ongoing involvement of birth parents as being in the best interest of the child (acknowledging that there will be circumstances where this is not the case) (AIHW, 2015; Salveron, Arney and Lewig, 2009). It will be important for this project to clarify what is best practice regarding the involvement of parents as well as carers, and to provide guidance on how this might be navigated.

Although many professionals in the survey demonstrated a thorough awareness of how to engage parents and why, many also indicated a need for more training and support to improve engagement across the sector. The survey results showed there are differing views on the importance of engaging parents and highlighted that there is currently no universal approach to engagement across organisations. To address this, it may be beneficial for widespread sector training and upskilling via resources on the benefits and importance of parental engagement and how it relates to the child's wellbeing and development. This project will consider resources to support the upskilling of practitioners and to outline agreed upon principles of engagement for organisations. Doing this could help to address the concerns regarding inconsistency of engagement with parents across the workforce, or engagement happening at the whim of a knowledgeable individual practitioner or staff member who champions its importance.

The lack of appropriate training and resources to effectively respond to the diversity of parents was identified in the survey as a barrier. This speaks to the need for this project to;

(a) make meaningful attempts to engage parents from diverse backgrounds and caring roles (e.g., diversity of gender, culture, age, ability), and

(b) include their experiences in the development of the participation model as well as appropriate resources.

This may require considerations such as the availability of translators, use of visual or plain English information sharing, and warm referrals to ensure a representative sample is achieved. It will also be important for the project to recognise and reward participating parents for their time and expertise by considering appropriate reimbursement or support strategies (e.g., travel/food vouchers to attend meetings; contact details to helplines).

It will be important for this project to help provide clarity to parents about the service sector, including the difference between statutory child protection and non-statutory child and family services. To build effective relationships, parents need to feel assured that they will be supported and not be 'tricked' or deceived, or that workers are 'colluding' with child protection.

Results from the survey, which are supported by research, show that parents experience many child and family services as untrustworthy and dishonest (Ross et al., 2017). Clear and accessible information, respect, and transparency will be the way forward in addressing these complexities. This will be especially important to consider when inviting parents to participate in the co-design aspect of this project, ensuring that the benefits, challenges and expectations of participation are clear to parents throughout the onboarding process.

Professionals working in this sector may need support in working with parents who present with multiple complex needs, or those with strong presentations of shame, fear, mistrust or anger. Many professionals in the survey noted that these can be some of the parental barriers to engagement. The project will consider resources or toolkits that can support practitioners in this work. Additionally, many practitioners in the survey identified the need for guidance on involving fathers more in family-focused work. Professionals identified a particular need for support when working with fathers who are known perpetrators of family violence. This may be something that needs to be supported at a more organisational or systemic level of practice as well.

As one respondent noted, it could be useful to ask parents the same questions professionals were asked in this survey. Another respondent suggested asking parents what they think could help them feel more at ease with services – this will be a key question in our codesign processes with parents to illuminate more effective pathways for engagement.

“Families need to be involved at all levels - policy, practice, service design, workforce capability etc. substantial resource development and resourcing of parents and family is needed to do this.”

Conclusion

Research tells us that meaningful parent engagement is achievable and can lead to better outcomes for children and young people (The Centre & University of Melbourne, 2020). However, the results of this survey highlight that many barriers can stand in the way of meaningful participation. To begin with, we may even need to define what ‘meaningful’ engagement or participation looks like – as one survey respondent noted: “Who is it meaningful for? Does meaningful engagement necessarily need to equate to safe parenting? Does meaningful mean change or can meaningful mean learning or simply acceptance or acknowledgement or insight?”

Professionals in the survey identified a lack of concrete guidance on how to engage parents, and while support for parental engagement appears to exist in some organisations, this is not a consistent feature across the sector. Similarly, strategies for engaging parents are provided inconsistently through existing training and education. Critically, the sector has differing views as to the value of parental engagement and the way it should be embedded into practice. Many approaches suffer from a lack of consistent evaluation and review, limiting the evidence-base for a wider and more scalable approach to parent participation (The Centre & University of Melbourne, 2020).

The Voice of Parents project has an opportunity to address some of these limitations through activities that build our knowledge, drawing on research, professional expertise, and the lived experience of parents. Developing a consistent, scalable suite of resources along with a Charter of Parental Participation will be an opportunity to embed a systematised approach to parental participation across the sector.

This report has highlighted insights from professionals undertaking the work of protecting children and engaging with parents where possible. To maximise the opportunity for children to achieve better outcomes through greater parental involvement, this project will use these survey insights, along with the lived experience insights of parents, to develop a model of participation that is lived experience-informed and can be embedded in sector-wide practice.

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