

Component 3

Working with parents and carers - Summary of the literature



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Family is central to children's mental health and wellbeing. Contemporary family life is more complex than in the past, with the composition of families becoming increasingly diverse. Recent trends indicate increased rates of single parent households, smaller family sizes, greater choice in cohabitation options, with cross-racial, age-disparate and same sex relationships becoming increasingly common (Hayes, Weston & Qu, 2011). Children who are provided with emotional, social and physical support are more likely to experience positive wellbeing and reach their full potential (Allen & Smith, 2008). The family unit has a strong influence on the way that a child develops physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively.

Societal pressures on parents and families are important to keep in mind when examining family-related risk and protective factors that influence children's mental health and wellbeing. Without this context, research which examines the influence of parents and families on children can become judgemental. A core principle held by KidsMatter Primary, which is consistent with a family-centred practice philosophy, is that all parents want the best for their children (Centre for Community Child Health, 2004). As home and school are the two most proximal contexts for children's development, recognising their shared interests and responsibilities for children will encourage partnerships and a caring school community to develop around the child. An effective partnership is most likely to promote the child's wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). It is this focus that Component 3 of KidsMatter Primary brings, as the literature spanning several decades is now clear that there are multiple benefits to schools and families working together.

In keeping with the diversity of families, the term "parent" when used in this document includes all those who provide significant care for children in a home or family context such as grandparents or extended families, foster carers, step parents, etc.

Definition of 'family'

The term, 'family', can be used to describe any of the wide variety of home arrangements that people establish to care for and rear children. The diversity of Australian families is evident in the growth of non-traditional family structures.

Family structure can be defined in various ways, including: parents' relationships to children in the household (biological, non-biological); parents' relationship status and relationships history (divorced, separated, remarried); the number of parents in the family; and parents' sexual orientation. The role of extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, can vary in terms of accessibility and level of contact with children.

Other changes in the way families function reflect broader societal changes such as increased participation of women in the workforce. This has led to an experience of many mothers and fathers feeling time pressured (Baxter, Gray, Alexander, Strazdins & Bittman, 2007). While living standards for many families have risen, this has not occurred equally with many families disadvantaged financially. Comprehensive longitudinal research reveals that low household income correlates with less effective parenting practices, neighbourhood disadvantage, and social exclusion, all of which directly and indirectly impact on children's physical, cognitive and social-emotional development (e.g. Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, Gray & Smart, 2008).

What is parenting?

The concept of parenting as described by the Centre for Community Child Health, 2004 can be considered through a number of dimensions, including:

- providing children with basic care;
- protecting them from harm;
- loving and nurturing them;
- helping them to develop the skills they will need to participate fully in society as adults.

The manner in which these dimensions are achieved are influenced by factors such as personal history, cultural background, and the personal qualities of children (Hoghugh & Speight, 1998). Variations in parenting practices reflect preferences in style, as well as the various approaches needed to parent different children, in different contexts and at different stages of development. Rather than one ideal standard of parenting, ideas of 'good enough' parenting have been recognised as the provision of love; care and commitment; consistent limit setting; and the facilitation of

development. It is this parenting delivered consistently throughout childhood which will enable children to develop a sense of security essential for positive mental health and wellbeing (Winnicott, 1965).

Risks and protective factors in families

There are a number of family factors which are considered to place children at risk in terms of their mental health and wellbeing, including neglect in childhood, long term parental unemployment, parental substance abuse, harsh or inconsistent parenting style, social isolation, large family size and family violence and disharmony (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000). These factors should be considered with caution as a presence of a single risk factor within the family is not prescriptive for the development of mental health difficulties in children. More so, it is the accumulation of risk factors in the absence of protective factors which increases this likelihood.

Protective factors include supportive and caring family; family harmony; small family size; responsibility within the family; warmth and affectionate care giving; and supportive relationships with an adult. Research suggests that the most significant influence on a child's development is the way they are parented (Hoghughi, 1998). Key to the quality of parenting a child receives is the nature of the parent-child attachment. Attachment refers to the deep and enduring affectionate bond which typically develops between a child and their caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). Decades of research have shown that security of attachment is linked to a range of positive child outcomes over time, including positive mental health outcomes and success at school (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Cowan & Cowan, 2009).

The ways in which risk and protective factors interact is complex and using this framework helps schools see the ways in which they can provide protective factors, through policies and practices, that may serve to buffer family risk factors. For example, recent research conducted by SANE Australia, in conjunction with COPMI, (the national initiative for Children of Parents with a Mental Illness), found that of 331 parents who completed their survey, 63% reported that their child had been disadvantaged by having a parent with a mental illness, such as disruption to their children's education (32%) and ability to attend out of school activities (48%). Around one third

disclosed their illness to their child's school. Of these, half found the disclosure unhelpful because it led to stigmatisation by other parents, and in some cases, bullying of their child. The researchers recommended that schools review policies and practices to help families where a parent has a mental illness, so that they feel welcome at the school where support for issues concerning their children can be found (SANE Australia, 2012).

Whilst schools can feel powerless to alter many of the risk factors associated with children's mental health, the prominence of schools in the community and the relationships they develop with families means that they can facilitate access to information and community services which support the parenting role (Laluvein, 2010). In this way, they are well placed to work collaboratively with families to understand and assist the child at school. Schools can make available a range of supports to increase parents' access to support, promote positive parenting practices through providing information and assistance to access external services and professionals, as appropriate.

Collaborative working relationships

Placing value on the input and perspective of the other is fundamental to building a culture of partnerships between school and home (Epstein, 1995). Important features of such a partnership include trust; open communication; collaborative decision making; viewing each other as competent; and having a shared goal (Turnbull, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 2000). Examples of attributes of teachers that enhance relationships with parents include: warmth; openness; sensitivity; flexibility and accessibility (Comer & Haynes, 1991). Helpful dispositions include a positive attitude towards families and the relationship; approaching families as partners; and a commitment to communicating effectively with families (Baum & Swick, 2008, Epstein, 1995; Coleman & Wallinga, 2000). Successful partnerships require sustained mutual collaboration, support and participation of school staff and families in activities and efforts that result in a positive effect on children (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997). Such partnerships promote the consistency of care across children's key environments, and act as a protective factor for children's mental health (Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006).

Research by Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, (1995, 1997) outlining factors within schools,

families and the child that are associated with parental involvement suggests three key reasons which influence whether a parent will become involved with their child's school:

- personal understanding of the parental role;
- personal sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school;
- opportunities and demands for involvement presented by children and schools.

The researchers further suggest that parents and carers then choose specific forms of involvement in response to three issues: the specific domains of skill and knowledge they possess; the total demands on their time and energy; and in response to specific requests for involvement from children and the school. This explanatory model highlights factors residing within families and schools, as well as the partnership, which influence the success of attempts to increase parental involvement.

It can be useful to view school-parent relationships as dynamic and interactional, noting that parents will respond to cues given by schools just as schools react to parents' behaviour. The benefits of home and school forming a partnership are numerous, and include creating a sense of community, helping teachers better understand the whole child, and increasing parents' confidence about ways to support their child at home (Howland, et al., 2006). In addition, the benefits of parental involvement in children's learning and forming partnerships with schools has been well recognised in research in terms of student school engagement as well as academic success (Desforges & Aboucher, 2003). Benefits for teachers have also been identified because they are more likely to receive support from parents and hold higher levels of teaching efficacy as a result of collaborative school – family partnerships. Parent involvement in school is also associated with increased levels of child co-operation and conformity, peer sociability and confidence, and lower anti-social, worried or upset behaviour (Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart (2001).

Traditionally, family-school partnerships have been viewed within the context of newsletters and parent teacher interviews. Conventional examples of parent involvement include helping around the school with activities such as classroom reading, canteen duty, sports clubs and school fairs. In more recent decades

schools more actively explore ways of partnering with families, and take into account, the diversity of the school community and current pressures on families.

Some schools now focus on creating a welcoming front office or entrances to assist parents to feel comfortable approaching the school or have organised spaces for parents to congregate. A number of schools communicate effectively with the parent community using digital technologies, when appropriate. Other examples include a focus on using jargon-free language when interacting with parents, ensuring interpreters are available when necessary and genuinely acknowledging the parents' desire for involvement in their children's learning. The recognition of impediments that prevent parents involving themselves with schools can be recognised and taken into account when developing strategies to reduce the barriers for parents becoming involved in schools. Examples of impediments include the institutional nature of schools and the memories and assumptions that some parents attach to schools.

Viewing the development of a partnership as a process rather than a single one-off event can be useful in planning, implementing and reviewing strategies aimed at promoting family-school partnerships (Epstein, 1995). This requires the investment of time and efforts to understanding the needs and expectations of families as well as the school staff. There are many ways mutual understanding can be reached, including ensuring schools understand family, parent and community priorities. It is important to assist parents to understand school goals, curriculum and the social objectives of schooling. Schools can create an environment that welcomes and creates real roles for parents who wish to participate in the life of the school.

The range of ways that parents can participate in the school include support with parenting information sessions, volunteering opportunities, contribution to school planning; and collaborating with the broader community to strengthen school programs through external resources and services. Consideration by the school of the various ways in which parents can participate can lead to enhanced involvement and sense of belonging by parents.

The attitudes of school staff and families towards family involvement with the school will play a significant role in their shared capacity to

effectively work together. A dynamic where school staff and parents become 'us' and 'them', for example, has been identified as unhelpful, because it can lead each party to blame the other. The result then is that the primary focus of what families and parents have in common, teaching and supporting the child, is neglected (Henry, 1996). Parents and teachers are not homogenous groups and will differ in their attitudes and behaviours towards home and school partnerships. Accordingly, the relationships will vary from school to school and parent to parent. It can be helpful for schools to offer a variety of times, locations and activities for involvement in order to respond most effectively to the diversity of family situations (Epstein, 1995).

Unlike many other relationships, the parent-teacher relationship usually occurs through assignment rather than choice. As a result, the parent and teacher may not share common culture, values and life experiences (Keyes, 2000). Developing working, collaborative relationships with parents requires management of diverse expectations and priorities in order for the formation of collaborative working relationships which will benefit the mutual interest of the child, parent and teacher. When the school community includes families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, there are a number of factors which can impede a school's capacity to successfully engage families (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2006). This includes families who may not have knowledge of the Australian school system. Schools may also not understand the complex needs of particular families and the necessity for careful planning of meetings to ensure language and other cultural needs are met.

Schools have reported increased success if bicultural workers from local community organisations, migrant resource centres or community health services are part of the process of engagement and partnership development with families. This can be facilitated by the school building relationships, in the first instance, with local cultural and religious leaders and local family services which have an interest in focusing on parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Efforts to engage families, such as through multicultural events, are best not used in isolation but as an entry point into deeper discussions or activities. Schools could use resources such as *Opening the School Gate*, available from www.cmyi.net.au, to assist in developing effective collaborative working

relationships with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The focus on developing effective working relationships with families can include both bringing parents into the school, as well as going out to meet them in the community. Practices which are beginning to emerge in schools, which could be described as 'outward facing' approaches, include creating opportunities for parents to gain skills and confidence as adults and as learners, as well as increasing their ability to support their children's learning more effectively (National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, 2010). The opportunity to help build social cohesion in areas of disadvantage is seen as fundamental to engaging with children and their families in some schools. For others, it creates opportunities to combat isolation or offer enrichment. The key factors are to identify local need, create practices that focus on solutions that fit the context and to develop a strong sense of partnership – 'working with', not 'doing to'. This focus also requires all school staff to understand the value of engaging parents in this way to benefit the children's capacity to learn and succeed within the school environment (National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, 2010).

Efforts to involve those parents who tend not to engage with schools have included the employment of parent support workers who live within, and know the community. These workers are best able to gain the trust of parents who may feel challenged by direct contact with the school in the first instance. Consultation with parents about what helps bridge the gap between home and school and encourages the involvement of all parents will provide the best chance of the development of creative solutions that will be meaningful. It is then more likely that there will be increased active participation of parents, with flow-on benefits for students and school staff (National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, 2010).

Support for parenting

Increasing the support available to the adults responsible for raising children has been considered essential for attempts to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children (Sanders, et al, 1999; Tucci, Goddard, & Mitchell, 2004). This support enables parents to fulfil their role to the best of their ability.

Many reviews have concluded that supporting families and helping improve parenting practices in particular are the most effective ways of improving children's mental health (Sanders, et al, 1999). Despite this, research has found that one quarter of parents are reluctant to seek help for fear of being negatively evaluated or criticised (Tucci, Goddard, & Mitchell, 2004; Tucci, Mitchell & Goddard, 2005).

Large scale surveys have identified that the majority of parents and carers report a need for support or information while raising their children. A study conducted by Tucci, et al. (2005) showed that 78% of parents expressed a desire for information about how to improve their relationships with their children, with 63% of parents were also concerned about their level of confidence in their parenting ability. Other studies support these findings, and highlight the importance parents place on their role, and the priority they give to establishing positive attachments with their children (Tucci, Goddard & Mitchell, 2004; Tucci, Mitchell & Goddard, 2005; DeHoogd, Mitchell & Tucci, 2003).

In Australia, the 2004 Parenting Information Project reported parents had a limited awareness of how and where to access information and support in their community. The Project identified two broad types of information needs of parents: needs relating directly to the child (emotional, social, intellectual and physical development or health) and those relating to helping parents cope with parenthood. These needs included: balance between work and family, coping with financial pressures, ways to improve parent health and wellbeing, coping with changes in the relationship between parents and feelings of isolation (Centre for Community Child Health, 2007).

Parents who are experiencing difficulties in child rearing often consult teachers because they are seen as professionals with high community visibility who are respected and trusted (Sanders, et al, 1999). As previously stated, parents are not a homogenous group and the type of support they require, and are interested in, will vary and depend upon their needs and interests. Schools provide an access point for parents to gain this support and facilitate links with community agencies. If schools can support parents in their parenting role, it will enhance the mental health and wellbeing of children.

Support for parents can include a range of informal and formal mechanisms. Information (such as the parent and carer information sheets provided by KidsMatter, available at www.kidsmatter.edu.au) will be useful for many parents and can be made available through newsletters, parent noticeboards and during parent/teacher interviews or other school events. Increasingly, parents are accessing web based information and there are websites available which provide a range of parenting information, as well as the opportunity to participate in forums, such as the Raising Children Network (www.raisingchildren.net.au). When information or programs can be tailored to the specific needs of each parent, and introduced at a time when parents are most receptive to the information, the more beneficial they are likely to be. It has been reported that parents are most open to receiving support at transition points, and during times of change when they experience concerns about their children. It is also important for schools to ensure that parents are provided with options to choose when, and if, they will take advantage of the information and services. Offering options will provide more support, rather than parents feeling pressure to comply with school expectations around their parenting role.

At those times when parents require more than information and informal supports, schools can assist them in accessing local services such as community health centres, drug and alcohol services, parent support groups, and respite care services. Although schools are not directly responsible for providing parenting support, they can play a crucial role in facilitating access to structured programs which focus on the parenting role and parent-child relationships. It has been demonstrated that programs that improve parenting practices through enhancing cooperation and reducing children's behavioural problems can be effective in improving children's mental health and wellbeing. Examples of benefits arising from parenting programs include enhancing children's social skills; positive affect and co-operation; and reducing children's conduct problems and negative emotional states (Webster-Stratton, 1998).

There are a range of Australian parenting programs which have been shown through research to be particularly beneficial to parents, including: *Triple P – Positive Parenting Program* (McTaggart & Sanders, 2003; Sanders, Ralph, Sofronoff, Gardiner, Thompson, Dwyer, et al, 2008); *Exploring*

Together (Reid, Littlefield & Hammond, 2008); and *Tuning into Kids* (Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, & Prior, 2009). For further information about parenting programs, see the KidsMatter Programs Guide available on the website: www.kidsmatter.edu.au.

Parent support networks

The scope for schools to support parents with their parenting role is not limited to facilitating access to parenting information and community services. Connecting parents and carers together can increase their social support which is also a protective factor for children's mental health. Schools can facilitate social support and social integration roles for their family communities.

Social support refers to the availability of psychological and material resources intended to benefit an individual's ability to cope with stress (Cohen, 2004). Research has suggested that up to one in four parents experience a lack of support from family and friends. Parents who are younger, single or born overseas are considered to be most at risk in relation to a lack of social support, which is related to poorer wellbeing and psychological distress (Department of Family, Housing, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs, 2008). Lack of family involvement in children's activities and social isolation are considered risk factors for mental health difficulties in children (Commonwealth Department of Aged Care, 2000). The structure of a parent's social network, particularly the support from others and any feelings of isolation, influences relationships they have with their children and their parenting practices.

The concept of *social integration* incorporates the broad range of social relationships in which parents can participate and increase their engagement in diverse social activities. The term also includes a focus on the sense of community and identification with one's social roles (Brisette, Cohen, & Seeman, 2000). Social support and social integration promote social connectedness and positive psychological states as well as a sense of motivation and interest in caring for oneself.

Schools are well placed to build social connectedness with parents through the promotion of opportunities for their involvement in their child's education and in other activities at the school. These opportunities can include informal opportunities where the school

provides a space for parents to meet and share their parenting experiences. Schools can also offer opportunities for parents to obtain information, participate in the work of the school and contribute to planning. The social connectedness of parents positively impacts on children's academic achievement, mental health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Parents and families play a critical role and impact on children's mental health and wellbeing. Children will be most likely to succeed at school when collaborative working relationships form between school staff and parents. The quality of this relationship will influence to what extent parents feel supported by the school, become involved in events and contribute to school life. Through partnering with families, schools can increase the continuity and effectiveness of care for children across the settings in which they develop academically, socially, physically and emotionally.

To support their role, parents have expressed a desire for information and services in the community. Schools provide an ideal access point for parents to gain this support because of their regular contact through their children and their ability to form links with community agencies. Schools can also link parents together, thereby increasing social connections between families. Increasingly, schools are developing many creative responses to building effective working relationships with parents. As a result, they are able to see the value of their efforts for the overall benefit of children.

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