

Submission to the National Children's Commissioner- Human Rights Commission

Young parents and their children

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Early intervention – Young parents (mothers) and their children

Our research and practice experience over many years have provided us with insights into the experiences of younger mothers. This has included how they experience services in the form of early intervention aimed at decreasing risk and build parenting and economic capacity. There remain some significant gaps in how we understand young fathers and their participation as parents as well as their support needs.

A consistent message is that younger mothers have aspirations, hopes and dreams: for being the best parent they can be; for higher education; and for meaningful employment. However hopes and dreams are increasingly out of reach for many as primary systems of care (such as income support, health, education, and employment) become too difficult to navigate and do not work together to leverage opportunities for this vulnerable group. Key issues confronting young mothers on a day to day basis include:

- a lack of access to the fundamental resources available to other young people to enable them to access higher education and employment (enough money for transport, petrol, to gain a driver's licence, to undertake basic child safety courses such as first aid, etc);
- the impossibly high cost of housing and the need to frequently move;
- dangerous housing arrangements for young children
- the absence of affordable, high quality childcare;
- the predictive effects of stigma which reduce the likelihood of engaging with formal services;
- debilitating worries about children, including illness, disability and emotional/psychological issues;
- the impact of complex mental health, drug and alcohol use and family violence
- fear of accessing services which may result in their being reported to statutory authorities, through online systems which make it easier for professionals to discharge their reporting responsibilities than it is for vulnerable parents to receive help.
- for many families (especially families who are refugees) there were the impacts of war, dislocation and trauma.

This written submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission briefly summarises key messages about interventions that may assist young parents, drawn from our published articles and reports (see references) and our practice experience. In particular we point to the importance of developing more creative and collaborative strategies for reaching parents in normal, non-stigmatising ways.

1. Reduce “procedural madness”

There is a need for large systems such as Centrelink and the Child Support Agency to develop ways assist young parents instead of requiring them to engage with highly complex automated systems. These dehumanising experiences compound existing stresses of having too little money, impossible bills to pay and insecure housing. The need to provide secure environments for their children may be perceived as outweighing the risk of inadvertently

getting a 'Centrelink debt' or having rents increase as a result of accepting work on a casual basis. Changing normal income arrangements is risky and also requires long hours on the phone navigating automated systems. Stability of living arrangements is what we hear young parents say they most value for their children.

Funded secondary and targeted services could also be more actively involved in assisting parents to navigate these systems.

2. Consider/review current processes for statutory reporting in light of the impact on young parents' willingness to use early intervention programs

In an article soon to be published we cite others who argue that:

"..questions remain about the efficacy of having early intervention services when they are perceived by some groups as being a surveillance mechanism. Individuals do not have to behave in particularly deviant ways - they are just required to belong to a predetermined at risk group, to be screened and assessed before issues emerge (Castel 1991, Parton 2010).

The interactions between services and some of the young women [in our various studies] frequently confirmed their feelings of being treated differently to other mothers. It led them to actively avoid supportive services because they had negative experiences where they felt judged. Some were afraid to seek help because they worried that if they were not seen as coping, they would be reported to child protection. This latter situation led some young women to parent in isolated and difficult circumstances (British Journal of Social Work, forthcoming).

This is compounded by the manner in which many reports of suspected child abuse and neglect are now made (online, with minimal critical involvement). With increased reporting rates across Australia (reportedly due to increased family violence concerns) we note that most reports either do not make the threshold for investigation or are unsubstantiated following investigation. The unintended consequence of professionals fulfilling their statutory obligations to report suspicion may be harm to their existing fragile networks of support and reduction in their likelihood of seeking formal support in the future. It is important our processes for protecting children do not actually deter parents from helpful family support and other early intervention programs.

3. Provide relationship based support in normal non-stigmatising, as well as 'first to know' places such as with local GPs, schools and early childhood organisations, Centrelink, Housing etc.

Early intervention programs may be more successful where there is capacity to establish a trusting relationship and where services convey an effective message to younger mothers that the special attention they receive at critical times is voluntary, normal and well deserved. Young parents say they need someone they trust and who appreciates and respects them, to walk alongside them, helping them access services and providing much needed financial and education/careers advice. Our research indicates that these trusting

relationships are best placed in the normal non-stigmatised places that parents go on a day to day basis such as to GPs, schools, preschools and other early childhood facilities. The inevitable interactions with Centrelink and Housing providers also suggest opportunities to build a relationship with someone who can steer, connect and support parents.

4. Messages should acknowledge that parenting of young children is a real and important job and that children “come first”.

Our research shows that young parents do not regard themselves as “jobless” or “aimless” on welfare and that almost all look forward with high expectations to relinquishing reliance on income support as soon as they can do so. It is important that they are regarded as ‘good parents’ who need first to ensure their children are healthy, safe and happy, before they can turn their attention to education or employment.

The stated conviction that “children come first” is particularly strong among young women who have suffered significant adversity in their own lives. Part of the determination to be a ‘good mother’ and devote time to their young children springs from the desire to give their children a better chance than what they believe they have experienced.

In their estimation the ‘good mothering’ of young children is a worthy job. Programs to assist young parents should specifically acknowledge and respect the importance of the work parents have done in providing a happy healthy environment for their children.

Interventions are more likely to be successful if they convey an effective message to younger mothers that the special attention they receive at critical times is voluntary, normal and well deserved. These messages should also be applied in the training of staff, the way programs and services are described and in all forms of communication about programs.

5. Affordable, available, high quality child care

Young parents consistently say they cannot obtain child care relief when they urgently need respite, nor to allow them to take up opportunities for future study and/or employment. They express frustration and confusion about how it is possible for them to develop skills or obtain employment, even on a casual basis during their children’s’ critical early years without reliable flexible child care. The perception is that child care costs are astronomical and the systems required to seek rebates are complicated, indeed part of a swathe of unfathomable arrangements which are too easily miscalculated and may result in parents incurring a Centrelink debt. Free preschool of 15 hours a week in some states is helpful for part time study but unrealistic for casual, part time or full time employment. In our view, although early childhood education and care arrangements in Australia are of some assistance to parents in well paid, secure employment they are of minimal assistance to very young or vulnerable parents who are economically insecure.

6. Social Media

In a forthcoming journal publication we state:

There is also the potential for social media to play a role in increasing information, support and social interaction for young parents. A number of young parents found that Facebook enabled them to access virtual 'new mothers' groups'. Social media may offer an important pathway to provide parents with information about available support. Emerging evidence indicates that technology can play a role in developing and extending parents' social capital and social networks (Jang and Dworkin, 2014). Technology may also provide an avenue for reducing young parents' belief that services will judge their parenting capacity based on age through presenting positive images of young parents (British Journal of Social Work, forthcoming).

A good example of social media providing a 24 hour, non-judgemental support role to parents of all ages is the *Canberra Mums* Facebook site
<https://m.facebook.com/Canberramums/>

Published research

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