*Original Research Paper*

# Perspectives on Inclusivity and Support in Organised and Informal Activities for Parents of Preschool Children

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**Key words:** playgroups, parents, social networks, support, fathers, parenting

## Abstract

*A focus on parents' communities and social networks has increasingly become central to research on young children's developmental contexts. In this paper interviews conducted with 26 participants in two playgroups and one neighbourhood social network were analysed to identify key aspects of social interaction associated with feelings of inclusion and exclusion. Benefits thought to derive from social interactions with other parents were also identified. Benefits experienced by participants included empathy, acceptance, a sounding board for trying out ideas, tips about solving specific childrearing problems and someone to mind their children for short periods. Where parent interaction was encouraged and facilitated by a group leader, there appeared to be a greater sense of belonging for adults. However, things did not always go smoothly leading in some cases to feelings of being judged, of not belonging, of being forced into a competitive situation vis à vis the children and of being made to feel that fulfilling one's own social needs was inappropriate. Challenges for fathers of being connected with supportive social networks are also considered. Connections between some of these experiences and the broader social forces which promote particular ideas about successful parenting and childrearing are discussed. Suggestions are offered for activity coordinators and their support services.*

## Introduction

> We met at Mums and Babies and she's a bit like me, kind of down to earth, say what she thinks, where all the others were a bit, not stuck up but they were very … they'd sort of talk about you without talking to you and things like that. So they would always do their own thing and they were very girlie-girl, whereas Nancy  was brought up on a bit of land and so was I, so we weren't scared to get our hands dirty and they were, and they just, yeah, it just didn't sort of fit. (Mother site 1)

This parent's voice points to parent-to-parent social connections as an important aspect of young children's care. In this paper, I will be exploring aspects of parent peer interaction in the context of organised services and informal opportunities that exist in communities. A focus on parents' communities and social networks has increasingly become central to

research on young children's developmental contexts (Farrell, Taylor, & Tennent, 2004; Hayden, De Gioia, & Hadley, 2003; Roditti 2005). This reflects a social capital orientation to family services policies in countries around the world. Social capital has been defined as "the store of goodwill and cooperation between people ... an enabler for fostering the emotional and practical resources that support effective functioning in day-to-day life" (Hayden et al., 2003 p. 1). Early childhood and family services are being called on to foster the networks that enable social capital to circulate in communities. This involves both strengthening families' connections with services and building connections between families within a community with the aim of supporting its more vulnerable members. As an example of the emphasis on family-service partnership, in the author's home state, the Inquiry into Early Childhood Services recommended that families be "active participants in the shaping of the new service system" (Department for Education and Children's Services, 2005, p. 94).

Community engagement approaches aim to both support, and draw on, the relationships between families since it is these relationships which make up a community. What has been called 'social network intervention' (Scott, 2000) refers to actions by services aimed at building, strengthening and maintaining social ties between community members. In this climate, longstanding community run services, such as playgroups, are being seen with fresh eyes. Playgroups are potentially a significant context for parent networking and peer support. In New Zealand, one kind of playgroup movement, Playcentre, has taken up the notion of social capital and social networking in evaluating its outcomes and reports that its groups are "a significant social network facilitator ... often the primary source of adult socialisation" particularly in rural areas (Powell, 2005, p.3).

Social dynamics of communities are complex. They are made up of multiple, constantly occurring interactions between individuals and groups in which processes of identity work are involved (Doucet, 2000; Finch, 1983). Also, social networks, and even simple one-to-one friendships, do not operate in a vacuum. They are impacted on by broader social forces circulating ideas about what counts as successful parenting and child development (Hardyment, 1995; Sunderland, 1997), as well as by the unequal distribution of social resources such as good quality housing, efficient transport systems and accessible health care (Burke & Hulse, 2001). They are also inflected by the immediate context of parents' interactions which includes characteristics and purposes of spaces and occasions (Cohen, 1981; Blackford, 2004).

One of the social forces impacting on families is a competitive culture which emphasises individual achievement. The role of neoliberal governments in promoting this view of society has been noted (Davies & Bansel, 2007). In many countries including the UK and Australia, specific policies encouraging competition between schools, (including de-zoning, state funding of new private schools and publication of student results) have given some parents increased choice as well as increased pressure to ensure that their investments pay off (David, Davies, Edwards, Reay, & Standing, 1997). This social climate encourages the notion that amassing social capital through making the right social choices will guarantee a child's successful future. The impact of a climate of competitive child rearing on parents' social worlds has been observed by Caputo (2007) in a study of mothers whose children represented their family's first entry into private schooling. At its most negative, this goal manifested socially as 'surveillance' and 'blaming' between women motivated by fear that one's own child may fall short (Caputo, 2007).

In an anecdotal account of her encounters with parents, an adolescent support worker has noted that parents' social strategising begins when their children are very young through

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encouraging desirable playmates and avoiding opportunities to encounter marginalised families (Wiseman, 2007). This is consistent with an indepth ethnographic study which employed social capital theory in analysing parent interviews and observations (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). Researchers found that parents' networks were socioeconomically homogenous and that "the role of children's activities … was striking" in parents' network building (Horvat et al., p.328).

When considering the socially homogenous nature of parent networks, the issue of gender comes into play. Parent networks have reflected the gendered nature of parenting responsibility which up until recent times has been based on a division of labour in which women are primary carers. Fathers in these times are being strongly encouraged to participate in their young children's care. Where social networking studies have included men, they have pointed to significant differences in men's access to, and roles within, social networks (Doucet, 2000; Lareau, 1992).

A study of 23 shared parenting couples identified community relations as one of three major "forms of domestic responsibility", along with emotional maintenance and financial support (Doucet, 2000, p.168). Doucet notes that the women in these couples took all or most of the responsibility for maintaining the family's connections with others in the community even when fathers were the main childcare providers. Community norms reinforced traditional gender roles with social events and practices, such as children's birthday parties and playgroups, creating a stage for enacting these norms. Where men were present at such events, they were excluded from social interaction; frustration at this led to one of the fathers initiating a male network. Fathers' exclusion from social networks centred on children seems to occur even when women articulate the importance of father involvement. It has been suggested that publicly articulating such support is a way for women to enact particular parenting identities. Cohen (1981) found that stating this belief was associated with the active formation of a middle-class identity for mothers of working-class origins. The fact that many of the women's partners worked long hours meant they were not required to put this belief to the test. Doucet's study suggests that the actual presence of fathers challenges the social dynamics of women-only parent groups.

## The Study

This analysis is part of a larger multi-site study of the circulation of knowledge and resources related to children's learning and development (Nichols, Nixon, & Rowsell, 2009; Nichols, Nixon, Jurvansuu & Pudney, 2009; Nichols & Nixon, 2009; Nichols, Nixon, Rowsell, & Rainbird 2009; Rowsell & Nichols, 2009). In the larger study, we are particularly interested in how parents and caregivers access and produce the kinds of resources which can assist them to support their children. The category of resources is inclusive of information in all forms (textual, word of mouth, online), objects and activities (e.g. educational toys and games) and intangible assets such as moral support and affirmation.

Studies of parents' social networks fall into three categories. There are those which use quantitative analysis of individuals' survey responses to measure their social networks in terms of such characteristics as size and density (Walker & Riley, 2001). This approach can also be used to investigate the resources made available to parents (e.g. emotional support, financial assistance) in relation to the characteristics of their networks. The second kind of study takes a phenomenological approach using in-depth interviews to elicit parents' perceptions of, and feelings about, their social situations (Cohen 1981; Doucet 2000). These studies yield insights into the meanings parents associate with their experiences. Finally,

there are ethnographic studies employing observation often by researchers who are, or become, social insiders and participate in the networks they are investigating (Blackford, 2004; Caputo, 2007).

While the project as a whole takes an ethnographic approach with multiple kinds of data sources, this paper draws primarily on interview data elicited from individuals who were recruited through three sites: 1) Australian rural town playgroup; 2) Australian suburban playgroup; and 3) US residents of a large town recruited through our US-based researcher's social network. The total number of 29 participants in the interviews included 21 mothers, 4 fathers, 1 grandmother and 3 playgroup organisers. The majority of participants identified as Anglo-Australian or Anglo-American with one Chinese-Australian mother in Site 2 and one Hispanic-American mother in Site 3. The project is currently enlisting the involvement of an African Women's group in Site 2, a preschool for homeless children in Site 3 and a Vietnamese school with links to Site 1. It takes time to develop trusting relationships and social knowledge when researchers are cultural outsiders to particular communities so this development did not occur earlier in the project.

In Site 1, the playgroup was one of two available to residents of this small rural community. Our interviewees, 7 mothers, attended the church-based playgroup rather than the school-based service. Two of these were also volunteer coordinators. All identified strongly as members of their particular playgroup and the regularity of their attendance was testified by researcher observation. Their reasons for choosing the church rather than the school-based playgroup turned out to be particularly significant in revealing the elements which they believed contributed to a socially supportive service.

In Site 2, the large suburban regional centre had a concentration of services including several playgroups. The one attended by our interviewees was based in a church which also provided many other services such as health advice, social workers and practical assistance. Seven playgroup participants (6 mothers, 1 grandmother) were interviewed as well as a woman church leader who was also a playgroup leader. The father of one child also wished to be interviewed with his partner, although he was not a playgroup participant. The participants at this playgroup fell into two distinct categories: regular members of the church and non-members who had often initially come because they were attracted by the large banner advertising the playgroup. This banner was located on the corner of a busy intersection and highly visible to motorists coming in and out of the hub's commercial zone.

In Site 3, a medium sized US town, there was not a tradition of playgroup provision. Young children either stayed at home with a parent or nanny or went to a childcare centre. Home-based fathers were not uncommon in this site and 3 participated in interviews as well as 8 mothers. Parents with children at home and at kindergarten often sought opportunities to organise 'play dates' where a parent and child would visit the home of a peer for both adult-to-adult and child-to-child socialising. The researcher in this site was a participant in such a social network which facilitated access to informants.

Interviews with parents were held at their homes and explored the full range of sources of information and support in relation to their preschool children's care, development and learning. Interviews with playgroup coordinators explored strategies used in supporting and resourcing parents and their observations of parents' participation. In other papers, we have reported general findings about the resources and services sought and used by parents (Nichols et al, 2009a, Nichols & Nixon, 2009); those specific to children's literacy (Nichols et al 2009b) and the role of libraries in supporting early learning (Nichols, 2011 forthcoming). For this paper, I have worked with a subset of the interview data in which parents discussed their interactions with peers in relation to their needs for support,

affirmation, information or resources. Comments about experiences in playgroup settings have been of particular interest. Interviews were subjected to thematic analysis aimed at identifying key aspects of the social interaction between participants associated with feelings of inclusion and exclusion and also the benefits that were thought to derive from social interactions with other parents. The themes which will now be discussed are: parent-to-parent interaction and peer support; parenting standards; balancing child-centred and parent-centred approaches; fathers as problematic parent peers and the impact of child exceptionality. Drawing from these insights from parents and playgroup coordinators, the paper closes with implications for practice.

## Parent-to-Parent Interaction and Peer Support

This study does not attempt to reach generalisations about parents' experiences of social networks or the outcomes of their participation. Rather, it is part of a larger fabric we are weaving that will produce a multi-layered account of the circulation of knowledge and practice about children's learning and development (Nichols, Nixon, Rowsell & Rainbird 2011, forthcoming). However, some patterns have emerged across sites and individuals. I will overview these below and then explore certain aspects in greater depth drawing on the parents' accounts.

Overall, where parents spoke about experiencing regular positive interactions with other parents, they expressed more appreciation for the support offered by their adult peers and the personal benefits they had received. Parents who did not express this view quite often still thought that attending playgroup was beneficial, but this was in terms of the child's needs rather than their own.

Parents expressed that the benefits they received from positive social interactions with peers included empathy, acceptance, a sounding board for trying out ideas, tips about solving specific childrearing problems and someone to mind their children for short periods. Where parent interaction was encouraged and facilitated by a playgroup organiser, there appeared to be a greater sense of belonging for adults playgroup members.

However, things did not always go smoothly in parent-peer or parent-organiser interactions leading in some cases to feelings of being judged, of not belonging, of being forced into a competitive situation vis à vis the children and of being made to feel that fulfilling one's own social needs was inappropriate. It is possible to trace connections between some of these experiences and the broader social forces which promote particular ideas about successful parenting and childrearing.

## Parenting Standards: "I'm just normal and everyone is having these issues"

Feeling that it was acceptable to be a good enough parent, that is, that the norm for the social group was not an unrealistically high standard of parenting, was important to some parents. This seemed particularly related to children's behaviour and parents' responses to misbehaviour. Parents are aware that they are being judged, particularly given the media attention that is currently being given to the management of children's behaviour, for instance through television programs like 'Supernanny'. One of the playgroup organisers in Site 1 spoke about this pressure:

> There's so much about, you know, 'Don't smack, don't yell, don't do this,
> don't do that', some parents, you know … (Playgroup organiser, Site 1)

That she didn't complete the sentence underlines that this is a sensitive issue to even voice. One mother was more explicit about the type of conflict that can arise when a parent reacts negatively to the behaviour of another's child. In this instance the woman's son, 'Elton' had been involved in an altercation with a girl that occurred in the schoolyard at pick up time. The father of the girl had then intervened:

> Elton turned around and smacked her and [girl's father] grabbed Elton by the hand and he said "No, you don't do that", and I'm like "Don't tell my kid off if it doesn't affect your kid", type thing, and he was giving me advice on my son's attitude. (Mother, Site 1)

This mother was truly offended at being reprimanded by another parent about her son's behaviour. What she saw as a situation that should be sorted out between children was seen by the girl's father as requiring adult intervention. The father no doubt believed that being hit did 'affect' his daughter and felt justified in his response.

Children do sometimes behave in ways their parents find frustrating and hard to manage. One of the organisers of the playgroup at Site 1 had deliberately set out to create a social climate where it was safe to acknowledge this. Early on in the playgroup's life, she had consulted a family support worker in the nearest government service centre about effective ways to work with parents. She spoke of how she employed a circle sharing strategy, modelling trust and disclosure by starting the sharing herself:

> As we went around the circle, you know, I'm saying "I'm having problems with Aiden because he's doing [sound effects]", and as we went around the circle everybody opened up and said "Oh, my child does that", and it was as though "I'm not a hopeless mum or parent. Oh, I haven't got a problem child. I'm just normal and everyone is having these issues." (Playgroup organiser, Site 1)

The leader's self-disclosure acted to normalise parenting problems rather than attributing them only to a minority of failing parents. Based on Site 1 participants' statements about feeling accepted, this trust-building approach seemed to have contributed to positive experiences and strengthened members' commitment. This was a particularly cohesive group with strong regular attendance and relationships continuing outside the weekly sessions. Related to this was a feeling that it was possible to share responsibility for children, at least in some small way, with other trusted parents in the social network.

## Balancing Child-centred and Parent-centred Approaches: "You don't sit back and just focus on yours"

Playgroups fulfil social functions for both children and adults. In sites 1 and 2, parents often mentioned that a primary reason for their attending playgroup was for their child to socialise with other children and learn social skills such as sharing. It was also clear that while their children played, mothers could take what is often a rare opportunity for adult conversation.

At the same time, playgroups are often seen by service providers as a way to serve children's interests by building parenting skills. The coordinator at Site 2 took this view:

> An integral part of the whole thing is to be able to encourage interaction between the mother and the child, and to be able to [ … ] encourage that the mother participates with the child, and continue their bonding relationship. (Playgroup organiser, Site 2)

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From this perspective, playgroup is not only about child peer interaction occurring simultaneously with adult peer interaction; there needs to be parent-child interaction. At this site, one of the playgroup sessions was regularly attended by three women in their capacities as paid family daycare providers (although invited, none chose to be interviewed). These women's regular routine of sitting in a corner talking amongst themselves rather than participating with the children in activities such as song time, was seen by the coordinator as setting a bad example to other parents. This instance foregrounds tensions that can arise between adults' social needs and service's views of children's needs.

Children's service providers often espouse a child-centred philosophy in which the caring adult's role is to orient to children's goals and capabilities. However, some parents saw it differently. Within the context of a playgroup, an individualistic child-centred orientation, when taken by parents, can be interpreted as competitive and thus at odds with a positive social climate. A Site 1 parent explained that she felt excluded at a school-based playgroup because other mothers seemed so focused on their child's success. She responded by leaving this playgroup and seeking out the one to which she was now a member.

> The [other] playgroup anyway was more focused on "These are my children, they're your children", and there was a lot of trying to outdo, like "My Johnny is doing this, and my Johnny was doing that", and trying to outdo, and yeah, a bit of a cliquey group, whereas at [this playgroup] it's "Yep, these are your kids, these are my kids, but we're all looking after everyone's kids here … everyone sort of comes in and takes care of everyone else, it's not so much the one-on-one, and you don't sit back and just focus on yours. (Mother, Site 1)

Thus focusing on one's own child can (even unwittingly) communicate to other parents a lack of interest in making social contact. Additionally it may communicate a lack of willingness to share responsibility for all children in the immediate social group. For some mothers, this shared responsibility contributed to their ability to relax, knowing that they did not have to watch their child constantly and so could focus on valued adult interactions.

## Fathers as Problematic Parent Peers: "There is no sharing"

The three sites varied in terms of the observed participation of fathers in organised activities for parents of preschoolers impacting on our access to men as informants in this study. In Site 1 there were no fathers attending the church playgroup although there was some reported attendance at the school-based service. In Site 2, one grandfather was a regular participant (though not an interviewee) and a father was observed to 'pop in' to visit his partner and child during his lunch hour. A young father who attended on one occasion never returned; despite his evident engagement with his toddler, he was not greeted by any of the mothers. In Site 3, informants were recruited through the researcher's social network and this included three part or full-time at-home fathers. That the researcher's own partner was a part-time at-home dad may have contributed to this social network access. Site 3 informants also had a high SES profile, many of them working in the university that was the major employer in this town; it is in this demographic that shared parenting is more prevalent (Bulanda, 2004).

I will turn to the fathers' perspectives directly but first it is interesting to look at what was said about fathers in their absence. The topic of men's participation was introduced by the organiser of Site 1 playgroup, who we earlier saw was concerned with building trust in the group:

> Some of the things that get spoken about at playgroup, if there was a father there they'd go [snorts], but that's healthy, to me that's healthy, that's what … we've all been through it. We need to know that: "The way I'm feeling is actually quite normal", and that's what we want a lot of the mums to know. (Playgroup organiser, Site 1)

This reflects a view that what is normal for mothers of young children is different to what is normal for fathers. No details are given about the kinds of topics which she believes men would dismiss but clearly they relate to women's feelings about what they have 'been through'. The use of the term 'healthy', and the hint that topics are taboo, suggests that these experiences may relate to women's bodies e.g. pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and changing sexual feelings. It seems that men are positioned outside of, and potentially threatening, the safe domain of women's intimate conversations.

One of the fathers in Site 3 was clearly aware that women in his social circle were considered more empathetic and so received more trusting and intimate disclosures. As a full-time caring father, he had hoped to be included in open dialogue and was dismayed when, even after some time, this didn't happen:

> The women I've interacted with, or the fathers, were very uncomfortable talking about the things that with [his partner] they would open up with very clearly. [ … ] I think I don't give up quickly, but I think it becomes obvious after a certain amount of time of silence or awkwardness or anger, there is usually some kind of comfort, or opening up. There is no sharing. (Father, Site 3)

Fathers who take on significant childcare responsibilities inevitably experience many of the same concerns as mothers in relation to children's development, health and behaviour. Another father from Site 3 spoke of how he took the opportunity of casual conversations to raise issues:

> I would, at pick-up time after school, I would mention certain things that were happening or had been a challenge and sometimes they would offer something that they would raise as well. Or just casually, not necessarily directly asking for advice but indirectly looking for it. I found that to be very helpful. (Father, Site 3)

Possibly this casual approach was successful because it did not assume too much trust or breach the boundaries of intimacy which exist in some women's social circles.

## The Impact of Child Exceptionality: "You make an excuse for the way that she is"

> Everyone you know, like socially, everyone sort of obviously thinks their children are bright, so I find you withdraw because it's a, it's a very hard thing to talk about and when you mention it there's that, that social stigma, if you know what I mean, like "Oh, your child's gifted, *yeah*". (Mother, site 2)

Social acceptance seems to be less taken-for-granted by parents whose children are exceptional in some way. None of our informants' children had a disability but there were two whose children had been assessed as gifted. Their accounts were similar to that of a father in the pilot study (Nichols, Nixon, Jurvansuu, & Pudney, 2009). In each case, the parent spoke of experiencing social pressures related to the fact that the child did not

conform to developmental or behavioural norms. Given the emphasis on competition and achievement in society generally, it may seem strange that having an exceptional child may be considered a 'social stigma' as one of these parents put it.

However, in tension with the drive to produce successful children is the notion of a normative developmental sequence, which in its simplest form dictates the ages at which children should reach milestones (Howley, Spatig & Howley, 1999). Mothers, in particular, are exposed to these norms through popular media and peer conversation (Urwin, 1984). When children are gathered in groups, such as in a playgroup, talk often turns to their ages and milestones achieved, giving opportunities for judgements about development relative to peers. The playgroup organiser in Site 2 gave an example of one of the concerns that arose in conversation:

> Yesterday one [mother] was very upset because her child can't walk yet, and it was explained to her that they don't always walk all at the same time, and it actually turned out her friends picked up the child all the time, so it doesn't have to. (Playgroup organiser Site 2)

People are generally quick to offer reassurance if a child seems delayed in some minor way. When a child seems advanced, marvelling at her or his precocious abilities may be intended as a compliment. Such responses can, however, be experienced as excluding; the mother who made the 'social stigma' comment explained:

> This little one started counting probably around 13 months, and she'd sing and she's very loud, so. And people would come up to me "How old is she?" and comment. And you withdraw, you say "Oh, don't worry about her, that's just, she just loves …", and you make an excuse for the way that she is.

This mother experienced others' responses to her child's exceptionality as a barrier to social connectedness. She spoke of not wanting to appear as if she thought herself superior by showcasing her advanced child. In cases like this, a culture of the average, which is experienced by some parents as comfortable and non-elitist, was experienced as excluding.

'John' in the pilot study found that only sharing experiences with other parents of gifted children had alleviated this sense of isolation (Nichols et al 2009a). This mother, however, was not aware of the association of which John was a member. She continued to take her children to the nearest playgroup so that they could learn to socialise with other children even though she withdrew from socialising with the other parents who attended.

## Discussion and Implications

The views of parents participating in this project confirm that interactions with their adult peers are important in their children's preschool years. Playgroups provide regular, accessible, localised opportunities for caregivers to connect with others in similar circumstances while their children play. When relationships are able to develop, parents benefit from sharing experiences, moral support and practical advice which, even when it occurs only once a week, can be genuinely reassuring.

Bridge's (2002) analysis of neighbourhood social networks can provide a lens for considering the implications of these cases. Following Putnam (1993) he argues for the equally important contribution made by 'bonding' and 'bridging' ties to facilitating the circulation of different kinds of social capital. Bonding ties are created through regular, close, and generally face-to-face interactions characterised by mutuality, trust and

reciprocity. Bridging ties, on the other hand, are formed with acquaintances outside of the immediate social circle and facilitate access to new knowledge.

The kinds of social capital exchanged through bonding ties includes emotional support, affirmation and the kinds of practical help possible given members' resources. Site 1 appears to be an example of a playgroup which facilitates bonding ties. Members speak of trusting each other, sharing responsibility for all their children and being affirmed in their worth as good-enough parents.

Bonding ties take time to build and are more difficult to achieve when individuals have significantly different expectations and values. What is experienced as supportive by some parents, may be excluding to others. In this study, differences impacting on the development of close relationships in playgroup and other social encounter settings, included gender, a child's exceptionality, and differing expectations regarding child-parent and parent-parent social relationships.

Even though fathers in caregiving roles experience many of the same pressures and uncertainties as women, their presence in social contexts which have traditionally been for mothers, is not always welcome. Creating a safe space for women to share their experiences is seen by some service providers as disqualifying men from participation. We saw two contrasting examples of fathers attempting to create social relationships with other parents. One father can be seen as seeking out bonding ties; he wanted a 'sharing' experience and was bitterly disappointed at being excluded. Another father, taking a more casual approach, could be understood as working to create bridging ties which did not rely on strong trust and mutuality in order to facilitate his access to valued resources such as advice.

A child's difference can also create difficulties for forming bonding ties. Discourses of child development, which circulate widely, can encourage parents to categorise their own and others' children in terms of age norms (Howley et al., 1999; Urwin, 1984; Woollet & Phoenix, 1996). When their child's growth, current capabilities or behaviour depart from these norms, parents may be particularly sensitive to others' perceptions. Bonding ties are significantly compromised by perceptions of negative judgement from one's social peers.

How can service providers respond to these issues? Playgroup coordinators are often volunteers with limited time for consultation and planning. Organisations who resource playgroup coordinators have an important role to play in encouraging the development of playgroups as supportive social spaces. The following questions may assist services for parents and young children to reflect on aspects of the social environment and consider whether there is a need to adjust routines, communication or promotional strategies:

- Is time and space provided for adult-adult, child-child and adult-child socialising and collaboration?

- How is a newcomer greeted and oriented to the group?

- In what ways are norms or standards for parenting established, reinforced or challenged?

- Are non-traditional parenting models (father as primary carer, same-sex parenting) represented respectfully?

- Are caregiving fathers treated as full members of the parenting club?

- Do activities, such as craft, allow for a range of responses or do they reflect a 'one right way' approach?

- Is it OK for a parent or a child to have a bad day? How is withdrawal or anger dealt with?

- Is the power of personal story sharing harnessed to support parents who are experiencing doubts in their competence?

Parents can be supportive peers with a lot to offer each other. In offering parents and children a positive space for interacting, playgroups along with other community run family engagement programs have an important function in the social context for many families with young children. This function can only be enhanced by recognising that sometimes the communicative climate can create doubts and discomfort for parents and taking active steps to address this.

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**Acknowledgement**

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