

Submission to the National Children's Commissioner
regarding Australia's progress in implementing the
Convention on the Rights of Children

The role of parenting support in ensuring the protection of children's rights

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1. Introduction

The Parenting Research Centre is an independent, not-for-profit research organisation. We seek better outcomes for children by increasing effectiveness and innovation in the way families are supported in their parenting.

The Parenting Research Centre thanks the National Children's Commissioner for the invitation to make a submission to the Commission's Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

This submission focuses on the role of effective, accessible parenting support in improving physical health, mental health and child safety and wellbeing outcomes. In particular, the submission relates to the following cluster and associated articles:

6. Family environment and alternative care

- family environment and parental guidance in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child (art. 5)
- family reunification (art. 10)
- parents' common responsibilities, assistance to parents and the provision of childcare services (art. 18)

The central role of parents and families in ensuring that children grow up happy, healthy and safe is explicitly recognised in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Parents are encouraged to deal with rights issues in a manner that is developmentally appropriate (article 5). Parents play a critical role in ensuring that children's human rights are upheld and are recognised by the UNCRC as the most important "defenders" of their children's rights. Supporting families and parents, therefore, is of fundamental importance to the best interests of children.

2. What is parenting?

Parenting is the task of raising and nurturing children. It is done by a child's primary caregivers - for example, biological parents, adoptive parents, other family members or foster or kinship carers. These primary caregivers can be referred to as the child's parents.

Factors such as the age, gender and sexual orientation of a parent, or whether the parent is biologically related to a child, do not determine parenting capacity. What matters is what a parent does in the daily process of child rearing and the relationship the parent forms with the child.

There is no such thing as a 'perfect' parent, but there is such a thing as effective parenting. Effective parenting meets the physical, cognitive and emotional needs of children. It stimulates and nurtures children so that they develop the capacities to become skilled, self-reliant, empathic individuals who relate well to others.

Parenting requires a set of specific skills. These skills can be learned and, as such, can be practised and improved. But there is also no single 'right' way of parenting. Rather, effective parenting is dynamic and adaptive, sensitive to surrounding culture and context. Effective parenting is also sensitive to the child and the child's stage of development. In this sense, parenting is a two-way street - it impacts on children, and children influence the way they are parented.

3. What do we know about parenting?

Parenting has an impact on every aspect of child development, including physical health, mental health, and social, emotional and cognitive development. Parenting that influences child outcomes in a positive way is underpinned by several universal parenting qualities: nurturance, warmth, sensitivity, responsiveness and flexibility. These qualities can be expressed in a number of ways.

The Parenting Today in Victoria study (PRC, 2017), a representative survey of 2600 Victoria parents, showed that a large majority of parents (at least 90%) had confidence in themselves as parents, had the skills necessary to be a good parent, and had someone they could trust and turn to for advice. Positive parenting strategies were reported by the majority of the sample, with four out of five reporting that they rewarded or praised their children when they behaved well.

However, 28% agreed or strongly agreed that they were too critical of their child, and over a third were dissatisfied or had mixed feelings about the amount of time they could give their children. The same proportion of parents reported smacking their children at least a little, with parents of young children (3-5 years) reporting smacking more often than parents of children at other ages. This is particularly of concern considering the links between corporal punishment of children and a multitude of negative outcomes, including antisocial behaviour, external behaviour problems, low moral internalisation, aggression, mental health problems, negative parent-child relationship and risk of physical abuse (Child Family Community Australia, 2017).

Social and personal adversity and disadvantage can make it difficult to parent effectively. But ultimately it is not the adversity or disadvantage alone that are detrimental to children's outcomes, but also the extent to which these impair the quality of parenting. Effective parenting that embodies universal qualities such as warmth and responsiveness can buffer children from the negative effects of disadvantage and social adversity. In the Parenting Today in Victoria study, parents who felt more confident and effective displayed more positive parenting behaviours, and this confidence was shown to be more important than socio-demographic factors. In other words, the study showed that positive parenting and confidence can help to mitigate the effects of disadvantage on children. This indicates the importance of the role of universal services, such as the Maternal and Child Health service in Victoria, in providing parenting support and building parental confidence across the socio-demographic spectrum.

4. What is parenting support?

All parents will need support at some stage as their children grow and develop. Parenting support aims to improve child outcomes by influencing the nature and quality of parent-child interactions and relationships. However, although parenting has a profound influence on child development, parenting support is often overlooked when considering how to improve child outcomes (Michaux & McDonald, 2016).

The goal of parenting support should be capacity building. Through parenting support, parents should get the skills they need, become more empowered, confident and autonomous, and capable of dealing with future challenges. Parenting support can take multiple forms:

- Formal group parenting education programs
- Peer-to-peer support that occurs in playgroups or parent groups
- Technology based support such as online therapy, interactive websites, text messaging and smartphone apps.

The Parenting Today in Victoria study (PRC, 2017) showed that when their child had issues, most parents felt confident in knowing where to seek help for concerns about raising their children. Over 80% of parents said that, either currently or in the past, they had sought parenting information from other parents and friends and used online sources. Online support was used particularly by mothers and young parents. Around 70% read books or obtained information from health professionals, e.g. general practitioners or health educators. A large majority of parents were satisfied with this help, felt valued and did not feel judged, blamed or criticised.

The study also showed that many parents will get parenting support they need from informal networks, such as family and friends. Just over 90% of parents reported that they had someone they trusted and could turn to for advice, and most parents said they would turn to family first when they needed help with child raising. There was little difference in how parents reported their parenting experiences over different socio-economic area groupings.

Other parents may need or prefer formal, professional support, including long-term intensive forms of parenting support, because of their life circumstances or the needs of their children. Where risks may be present for children, for example in the child protection context, there can also be the opportunity for parenting support that increases child safety, enables family preservation and also improves child-parent interactions. In these situations, accessibility of support is especially important (see Section 5 for more information).

Despite what we know about parenting as a learned set of skills, much of the public discourse about parents and parenting features commentary, views and opinions built on the assumption that 'parenting comes naturally'. This is one example of divergence between what research says about parenting and what the public generally thinks about parenting. Such divergence can lead to barriers in accessing support or stigma in relation to parents and their parenting support needs.

To help address this divergence, in 2016 the Parenting Research Centre conducted research in collaboration with the FrameWorks Institute to map the gaps between expert and public understandings of effective parenting. This resulted in the Perceptions of Parenting report (<http://www.parentingrc.org.au/publications/perceptions>), which illustrated the shared understandings, assumptions and patterns of reasoning that Australians draw upon to think about parenting. For example, it was found that while the Australian public have several productive ways of thinking about parenting available to them, people's most dominant models limit their ability to understand the value of parenting programs and policy initiatives. Most notably, Australians' cultural models of parenting make them resistant to thinking about parenting as a conscious, skill-based practice that can be intentionally improved (Frameworks Institute, 2016).

5. Effective and accessible parenting support

Effective and accessible parenting support is a fundamental component of any initiative that seeks to achieve long-term, sustainable and widespread improvements in child, parent and family outcomes.

The role of government is to provide the infrastructure needed to support parents in their parenting role. A range of formal supports, staffed by skilled professionals, need to be available and easily accessible to cater to parents' different needs, preferences, values and beliefs.

In addition to providing parenting support, governments can facilitate effective parenting through policies and infrastructure. For example, workplace and education policies can provide parents and children with opportunities to spend high-quality time together.

Our research points to the following as features of effective parenting support.

5.1. Parenting support should draw on the best available evidence

Evidence-based approaches to parenting support are those that have been proven to be effective in terms of what is delivered (i.e. the content of the intervention), how it is delivered (i.e. evidence-based processes) and client values and preferences. In the context of finite resources, and considering the potential for harm from ineffective interventions, it is important that parenting support is informed by the best available evidence.

Parenting support need not be limited to structured or manualised evidence-based programs. It can incorporate many different types of support such as quality-assured online information and advice resources, group-based peer support, one-on-one counselling and home visits. A range of different forms of support will ensure that the diverse needs of parents and their preferences for access to information are met.

5.2. Parenting support should be informed by ongoing research and evaluation

Research and evaluation plays a critical role in determining what works or doesn't work, for whom and in what context. Ongoing research and evaluation of policies and services is critical to ensuring high quality and effective parenting support.

5.3. Parenting support should focus on outcomes for the child

The focus of parenting support policy and service delivery should always be the outcomes for the child. Parenting support is a means to an end; the end is positive outcomes for children.

5.4. Parenting support should focus on function rather than form

Eating together at dinnertime is an oft-cited example of a positive family practice. However, it is the function associated with that behaviour - bringing a family together to facilitate conversation and shared experiences - that is important. The form, which is sitting at the table and eating dinner, is less important. Parenting support needs to focus on function rather than form.

5.5. Parenting support should be accessible

Effective parenting support can only be helpful if it is accessible to those who need it. Accessible support is available within the parent's community (for example, via maternal child health or community-based service settings) at a level that is appropriate to the parent's need. The service

delivery approach is also important to accessibility of parenting support, with strengths-based, collaborative approaches being most effective at engaging parents.

Effective, accessible parenting support involves parents and service providers working in partnership, sharing expertise and decision-making processes. Partnership approaches are especially important when service providers are working directly with vulnerable families (Moore et al., 2012). Partnership approaches are built on collaborative relationships that are characterised by mutual trust, respect and responsibility (Davis & Day, 2010). Within collaborative relationships, professionals treat parents as experts on their children and acknowledge existing family strengths.

Another key source of accessible support is quality-assured online information and advice. One example is the Raising Children Network (<http://raisingchildren.net.au>), Australia's premier evidence-based website for parents, which is funded by the Department of Social Services and run by the Parenting Research Centre in collaboration with the Centre for Community Child Health. It provides a comprehensive range of high-quality videos, apps and articles on health, learning, development and behaviour from pregnancy and infancy through to late teens. The Raising Children Network is accessed by over 48,000 parents and professionals every day, with over 14.7 million visitors in the past year reading approximately 25 million pages. User research indicates that parents and professionals who visit the Raising Children Network are actively seeking credible and reliable information and that their information needs are dynamic.

Support also needs to be accessible for parents of children with a disability. An example is MyTime (<https://www.mytime.net.au/>), a national program of facilitated peer support groups for parents and carers of children up to age 16 with a disability, developmental delay or chronic medical condition. MyTime groups consist of 4-12 parents, a facilitator to manage group processes, and at least one play helper to keep children engaged in appropriate activities in order to support parent participation in the groups. The content and delivery of individual MyTime group sessions are determined at a local level, though typically structured around one or more activities such as topic-based discussion, guest speakers, pampering and bonding activities or excursions and play activities for children and siblings.

The MyTime model is based on research which suggests that peer support programs can provide a range of benefits to parents of children with a disability or chronic medical condition. A 2015 evaluation found that there were significant benefits for parents related to engaging in MyTime groups, including access to social support, time out and relevant information and ideas (Wynter, Hammarberg, Sartore, Cann & Fisher, 2015).

6. Parenting in the teenage years

Adolescence is a dynamic period of growth and maturation that can impact significantly on pathways to adulthood, both in positive and negative directions (Dahl et al., 2018). The physical, nutritional and social environments that adolescents exist in are central to outcomes during this sensitive phase of development (Patton et al., 2018). Attention to these environments is particularly important at a time in history when adolescence extends over a longer period than ever before. Lower ages of puberty and later markers of adulthood, such as leaving home and age at marriage, contribute to this extended period, as does a greater understanding of brain growth that extends into the early-mid 20s (Patton et al., 2018).

Adolescence is also a time of significant vulnerability. In particular, the pre- and early teen years (ages 11-13) is a significant time of transition with major developmental changes and an increasing push for autonomy. Around the same time as puberty, we transition most children to large, relatively impersonal school environments that are poorly matched to their developmental needs (Bundy et al., 2017). Vulnerability is also evident in statistics related to mental health at this age. One in eight 12-17-year olds and one in four 18-24-year olds have a mental health problem (Lawrence et al., 2015). The first onset of many mental health problems occurs in childhood and adolescence, and yet access to services is likely to happen much later (Kessler et al., 2007). Experimentation with tobacco, alcohol and other drugs also typically begins in adolescence, which can escalate in young adulthood to higher risk use and dependence. For example, teenagers who showed patterns of drinking that was characterised by a loss of control (e.g. difficulty stopping, amnesia) are more at risk of alcohol use disorder in young adulthood (Olsson et al., 2016).

6.1. The crucial role of parents in adolescence

The vulnerability and risk-taking behaviours associated with the adolescent years highlights the importance of prevention, early identification and intervention. Parents have a crucial and often misunderstood role in this developmental period, often through to the early-20s.

The adolescent brain is malleable, making it more vulnerable to chemical and hormonal damage but also more receptive to learning new skills and absorbing new information. The types of experiences and environments that teenagers are exposed to make a critical difference to positive outcomes in adolescence and adulthood. In particular, the family environment plays an undervalued role at this age. Research shows that parenting is a strong determinant of adolescent wellbeing (Dahl et al., 2018) and that accepting and supportive family relationships in adolescence have an influence on healthy functioning, even into adulthood (Paradis et al., 2011).

Although it is commonly assumed that peers are more important, they do not replace parents as sources of support and information. Teenagers still need parents to monitor their behaviours, set boundaries and provide a rich array of positive activities. For example, home needs to feel like a safe haven where teenagers can retreat from everyday pressures and stresses, and a place where routine is predictable (Steinberg, 2014).

In spite of this continued importance, research shows that parents feel less effective and are more likely to express mixed feelings about their parenting skills in the teenage years (Parenting Research Centre, [PRC], 2017). The Parenting Today in Victoria study (PRC, 2017) showed that the teenage years coincide with parents feeling like they were less likely to have someone to trust and to turn to for advice. Middle school years in particular are shown to be a time when difficulty peaks for mothers across dimensions including feelings of emptiness, low life satisfaction and low parenting satisfaction. In particular, parenting satisfaction was lower in the middle school years than any other childhood period (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016).

This highlights the critical need for parenting support to continue into the adolescent years. This need is also reflected in user statistics from the Raising Children Network, which shows that information about parenting teenagers is well accessed. In 2017, for example, there were more than 190,000 page views for articles on social and emotional development in teenagers, 157,000 views for physical changes in teenagers and 146,000 for disrespectful behaviour.

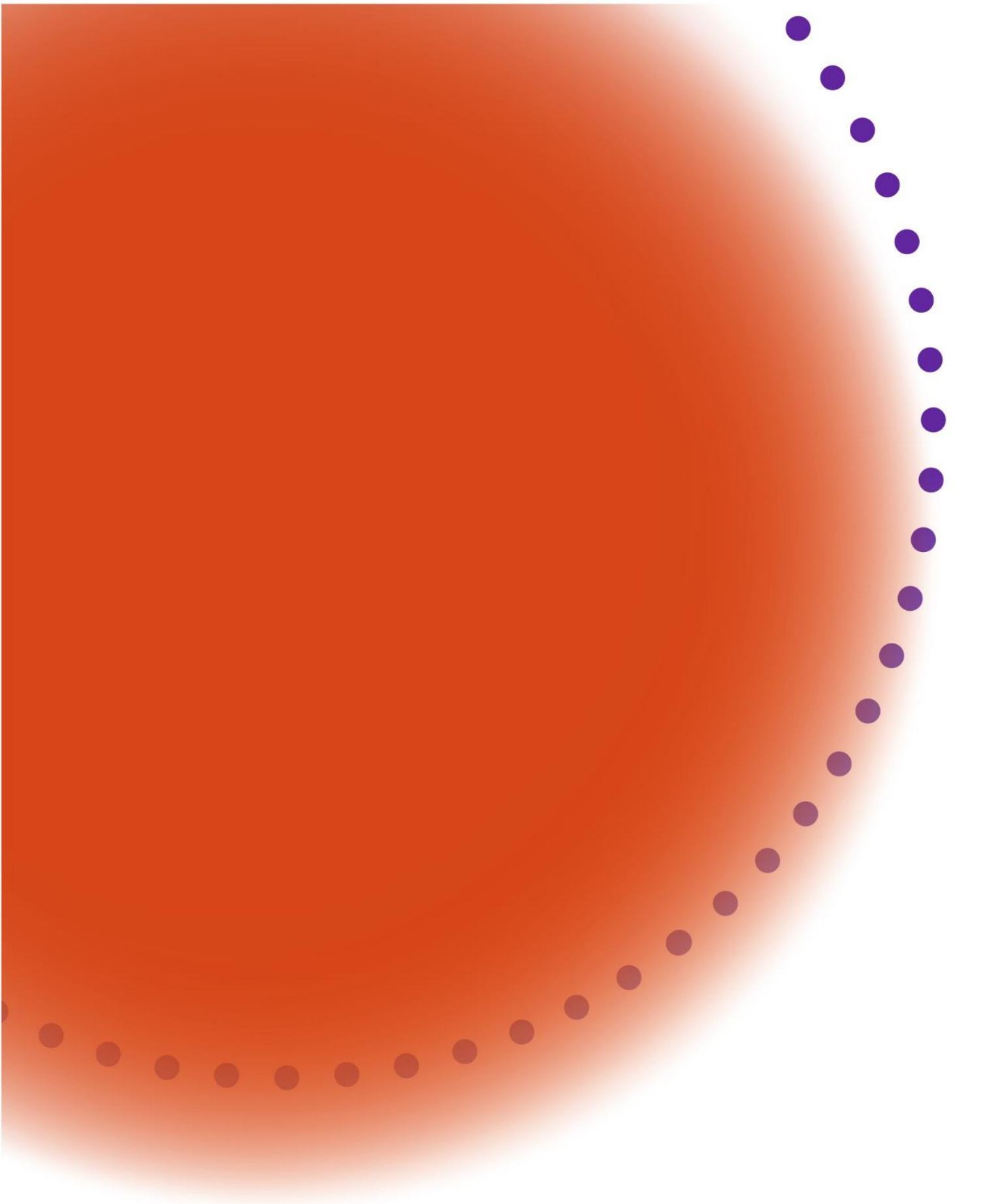
7. Conclusion

Parenting is a skill that nearly all parents have the capacity to learn, and the vast majority of parents are capable of parenting well, given the right support. All parents need support as their children grow and develop, and this support is important in but should not be restricted to the early years. The "right" support includes effective, accessible parenting support, as described in this submission. We believe this support is a critical aspect of protecting the rights of Australian children and making sure that they have the best chance of positive outcomes in adulthood.

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