

# Partnership with families in early childhood education: Exploratory study

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## **Partnership with families in early childhood education: Exploratory study**

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### **Abstract**

**CHILDREN LEARN** in the context of relationships with important caregivers. The early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector increasingly recognises that supporting strong relationships between families and ECEC services is a powerful way to improve children's educational, health and wellbeing outcomes. We report findings from a study which, via online surveys and focus groups with parents and educators, sought to understand (a) parents' experiences of collaborative practice, (b) educators' confidence in working with families, and (c) educators' perceptions of training needs. The results suggest families commonly feel welcomed and respected but desire improvements in educator communication. Most educators reported high confidence to share children's progress but less confidence to greet families by name, raise or respond to parent concerns, or work with families facing significant parenting stressors. These findings indicate a need for practice support and training to improve educators' skills and confidence in partnering with families.

### **Introduction**

In early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, educators communicate with parents<sup>i</sup> about a range of matters related to children's development and learning. Educators are seen as trusted sources of information about child development and parents often seek educators' advice before seeking support from specialised services (Parenting Research Centre, 2019). With 86% of Australian 4-year-old children enrolled in preschool services in 2018 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019), the ECEC sector has potential to alter the trajectory of children's development through partnerships with families as well as through direct interactions with children.

Studies of programs aimed at strengthening educator-parent partnerships demonstrate that facilitating communication and collaboration between parents and educators can boost children's academic and social-emotional skill development (Bierman et al., 2017; Fenech, 2013; Lang et al., 2016). Lin et al. (2019) have shown that educators sharing information with parents about what to

do at home can influence children's learning. Parents who perceived greater communication from their child's educators reported more home learning activities focused on literacy and numeracy skills.

With a strong educator-parent relationship in place, educators are well positioned to share knowledge and skills with families about how children learn and develop through warm, responsive and consistent home learning environments. This has potential to make a difference because warm, responsive, consistent parenting and a stimulating home learning environment can be powerful influential factors for optimising children's outcomes (Bierman et al., 2017; Fenech, 2013; Lang et al., 2016).

The importance of partnerships between educators and parents, and the crucial role parents have in their children's lives, is reflected in ECEC guiding documents; National Quality Framework and Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF; Department of Education and Training, 2016). Partnerships with families is assessed as part of Area 6 of the National Quality Standard (NQS) for all ECEC providers. The VEYLDF Practice Principle Guide for Partnerships with Families (Department of Education and Training, 2017, p. 5) states that "effective partnerships with families is characterised by: mutual respect and trust; reciprocity; shared power and decision making; open communication and responsive listening; honesty; shared goals; clarity about roles and responsibilities; complementary expertise and contributions; and negotiation".

A study by Rouse and O'Brien (2017) aimed to explore the nature of partnerships based on perspectives of educators and parents from one preschool in Melbourne. The authors were particularly interested in mutuality and reciprocity in the educator-parent relationship. They reported that although educators perceived they were collaborating effectively, all parents reported they were not given enough information about their child's learning. The authors suggested educators might interpret parent involvement in preschool activities, such as morning teas and the duty roster, as evidence they are effectively partnering with parents, rather than undertaking shared decision making or joint goal setting.

In addition to engagement in shared decision making, educators have potential to improve the parent-child relationship. Research by O'Connor et al. (2018) sought to understand educators' perceptions of their role in fostering parent-child relationships and what support they might need to do this. They found educators are well placed and are seeking resources to improve their skills and confidence to capitalize on everyday interactions with parents to nurture the parent-child relationship. O'Connor et al. (2018) suggest that educators' practical experience and observations of parents and children over time lay a good foundation for educators to provide support to the parent-child relationship.

Murray et al. (2015) have argued educators are positioned to build quality parent-educator relationships because of potential for interaction. Parents communicate more with educators in early education settings than at school. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2005) noted that when children go to school the types of interactions change from short conversations occurring frequently to longer infrequent conversations. Frequent interactions provide opportunities for parents and educators to form collaborative relationships.

The work of early childhood educators includes engaging families facing parenting stressors and living in vulnerable circumstances. Fordham and Kennedy (2017) conducted an analysis of an ECEC program specifically designed for children and families facing additional stressors. They reported the importance of supporting gradual transitions, building relationships over time, shared planning with families and ongoing professional development for educators, as well as recommending training in family-centered practice.

Although educators understand the importance of partnering with families, many are uncertain how to do this. A study by O'Connor et al. (2018) found educators were hesitant to engage with parents even though they acknowledged the importance of the parent-child relationship. Given evidence about the importance of educator-parent relationships, and as part of a large exploratory project, we explored current partnership practice across the ECEC sector asking:

- What are parents' experiences of collaborative practice and what do they think their service could do better?
- How confident are educators in working with families?
- To what extent do educators believe their training prepared them to work with families, what preferences do educators have regarding training delivery and what are their training needs?

### **Method**

This paper presents responses from online surveys and focus groups conducted with educators working in ECEC services and ECEC users (i.e., parents). Survey and focus group questions were based on consultation with members of a project advisory group, NQS targets for collaboration, as well as VEYLDF and family-centred practice principles.

The survey and focus groups were part of a larger exploratory project, which included extensive field consultations, exploration of NQS assessment data, desktop reviews of training provision, and a literature review. This mixed methods approach was chosen recognising that quantitative and qualitative approaches combined can provide a better understanding of issues being researched than either approach alone (Doyle et al., 2009; Ivankova et al., 2007). Consistent

with the purposes of mixed methods design articulated by Greene et al. (1989) our purpose was to expand the breadth and scope of information acquired.

Analysis of qualitative data derived from educator and parent focus groups followed a deductive approach as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Burnard et al. (2008). Compared with an inductive approach, the deductive method is a 'top down' approach that derives themes based on pre-determined theory and relevant research and, in the case of this study, extensive stakeholder consultation. This method followed a two staged process in which initial themes were identified and subsequently refined, as relevant to the research questions.

The Parenting Research Centre (PRC) Human Research and Ethics Committee (App31, August 2015) and the Victoria Department of Education and Training (2015\_002837) granted ethics approval.

Participation in online surveys and focus groups was voluntary and participants received a plain language information statement. Participants were told no individual data would be reported to their centres or advisory group members. Staff running focus groups and analysing online survey data were professionally trained in managing sensitive issues and working with vulnerable families. A protocol for managing sensitive issues was in place and approved by the ethics committee.

## **Educators**

Educators were recruited through organisation-wide email and newsletter notices distributed by advisory group organisations and their networks. In both the online survey and focus groups, educators answered questions about their experience of and confidence in working with parents, and how they could be supported to improve partnerships with parents.

### ***Educator Online Survey***

Using various response types (e.g., seven-point Likert scales, dichotomous responses and free text) the survey asked about (a) training in building collaborative relationships with families, (b) how educators currently work to collaborate with families, (c) their confidence in collaborating with families, and (d) any training to be developed to assist educators to collaborate with families. Demographic information included educators' work postcode, age, gender, qualification/s, years and/or months working in sector, service type, and their employment status.

The survey was completed by 318 educators from throughout Australia, most of whom were from Victoria (70.1%). Other states/territories included: Queensland (3.5%), New South Wales (2.8%), South Australia (1.9%), Western Australia (1.3%), Northern Territory (0.9%), Australian Capital Territory (0.6%), and Tasmania (0.6%). Some (18.2%) did not indicate which state or territory

they were from. Sixty-one percent resided in major cities, 29% in inner regional areas, 8% in outer regional areas and 1% in very remote areas. Fifty-six percent were aged between 25 and 44 years, with an average of nine years' industry experience. Twenty percent spoke a language other than English at home and a small proportion identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (4.1%). Most had a diploma qualification or higher (70%). Educators' primary places of employment were: long day care (52%), kindergarten (5%), kindergarten and long day care combined (15%), family day care (3%), outside school hours care (OSHC) (11%), and other (2%). Note in Victoria, Australia kindergarten is a voluntary one to two-year preschool program before primary school.

### ***Educator Focus Groups***

Educator focus group questions aimed to elicit further information about (a) how educators collaborate with parents and involve parents in children's learning, (b) some of the challenges in working collaboratively with parents, (c) how much and what type of professional development they had completed on collaboration with parents, and (d) preferred mode of training delivery. The same demographic questions were asked as in the survey.

Thirty-nine Victorian educators attended four focus groups. Participants had worked in the sector between 4 and 37 years (average 14 years). A large proportion were aged between 25 and 29 years (23%) or 50 and 54 years (20.5%). Educators' primary place of employment included long day care (41%), kindergarten (18%) and kindergarten and long day care combined (18%). Twenty-one percent identified as a teacher, group leader or centre director, 18% as an educational or pedagogical leader, 8% a diploma educator, and 5% 'other.' Forty-one percent had a bachelor qualification or higher, which is more than national representation of bachelor qualified educators (11.9%) according to the ECEC National Workforce Census 2016 (The Social Research Centre, 2017).

Four focus groups lasted 60 to 90 minutes each, using a semi-structured interview style. Group size ranged from three to 18 people and groups were facilitated by one or two specialists from the PRC. We asked questions such as, "Knowing what some of the challenges are, what ideas do you have on what would help you or support you to more effectively collaborate with families?" With permission, all focus groups were audio recorded. Recordings were analysed to identify common themes by an early childhood qualitative researcher who was independent of the project team.

### **Parents**

Parents were recruited to the online survey through the *Raising Children Network* website ([www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)) and their child's ECEC agency. Recruitment for focus groups was conducted via the ECEC agency.

### ***Parent Survey***

Using seven-point Likert scales, dichotomous responses and free text, the online survey asked parents how welcome they feel in the centre, whether their opinions, values and culture are valued, and about the level of support they received from educators regarding their child's learning and development. The survey collected demographic information including postcode, gender age of parent and child enrolled, level of education, employment status and if their child has a disability. Two hundred and sixty-five parents from across Australia responded to the survey. Only parents with a child between zero and eight years currently attending an ECEC service were eligible.

Parent participants were mostly women (81%). Approximately one third were aged between 35 and 39 years (34%) and almost half were from Victoria (43%). Other states/territories included: New South Wales (16.6%), Queensland (9.1%), Western Australia (5.7%), South Australia (4.5%), Northern Territory (2.6%), Australian Capital Territory (1.9%), and Tasmania (1.9%). Seventy-eight percent of parents resided in major cities, 12% in inner regional areas, 17% in outer regional areas and 1% in a remote area. Most had bachelor level or higher qualifications (64.1%). Few parents and children identified as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (2% and 1% respectively). A small number reported at least one child with a disability (4.2%). Twenty-one percent came from households where a language other than English was spoken, and 5% reported government benefits as their primary source of income. Parents were asked to think about only one of their children at one ECEC service they used: long day care service (73%), OSHC (11%), kindergarten (10%), family day care (5%).

### ***Parent Focus Groups***

Parent focus group questions were designed to elicit views about how ECEC services currently collaborate with families, whether the services offer enough opportunities for collaboration, and what effective collaboration would look like. Participants were asked the same demographic questions as parent survey participants.

Sixteen parents (representing 16 families) took part in one of three focus groups across metropolitan Melbourne. Thirteen parents were older than 30 years, two identified their child as having a disability and one identified their children as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Four parents spoke a language other than English at home. Seven parents were employed part time or casually and five reported government benefits as their primary source of income. Highest levels of education included: a bachelor or higher degree (nine), some high school (four), vocational qualification or diploma (two) and other (one). Of 31 children across 16 families, 10 were enrolled in long day care, six in kindergarten, five in OSHC, and none in family day care.

A semi-structured interview style was used with questions such as "How do staff involve you in your child's learning and development?" and "What kinds of things do educators do to learn

about what's important to you and your family?" Responses were audio recorded, with permission from participants, and analysed by an independent researcher.

## Results<sup>ii</sup>

### Online Surveys

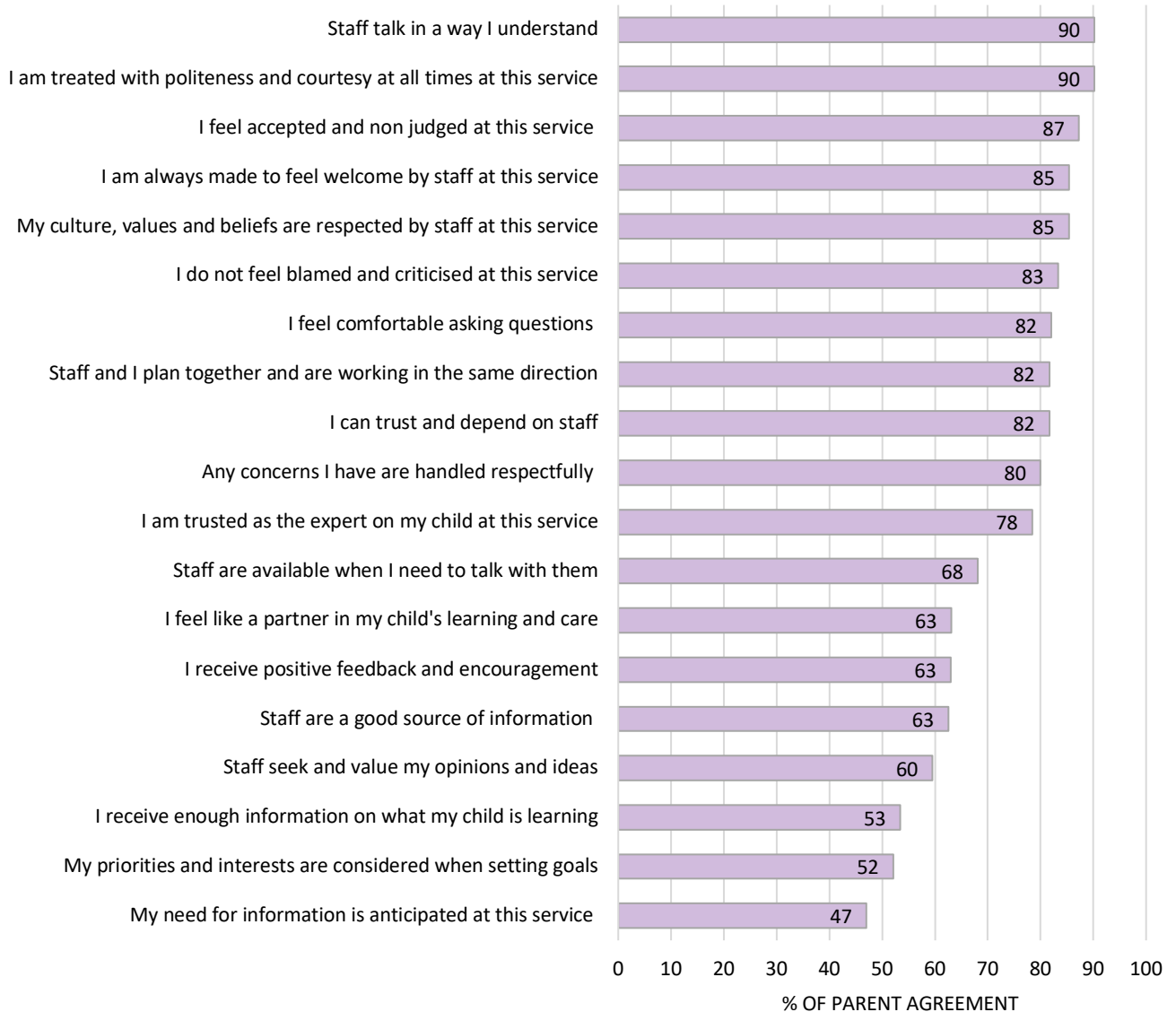
#### ***Parent's Experiences of Collaboration***

Of the 265 parents who completed the survey, 22% reported they *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with all 19 statements about collaborative practice in their service. All statements were phrased as positive practice. Ninety percent of parents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that "I am treated with politeness and courtesy at all times at this service," and that "Staff talk to me in a way I understand at this service." Fewer parents agreed with the statements that "My need for information is anticipated at this service" (47%), "My priorities and interests as a parent are considered when setting goals for my child" (52%), and "I receive enough information on what my child is learning" (53%). Figure 1 shows parent responses.

#### **Figure 1**

*Percentage of parents who agreed or strongly agreed to statements about collaborative practice at the ECEC service (n=265)*





**What Could be Better**

Forty one percent of parents responded to an optional question asking what else their service could do to better support their child’s learning and development. Fifty-four percent of the comments from those who did respond expressed a need for improved communication – both with families and within the service. Parents were seeking more information about how their child’s development and learning was progressing.

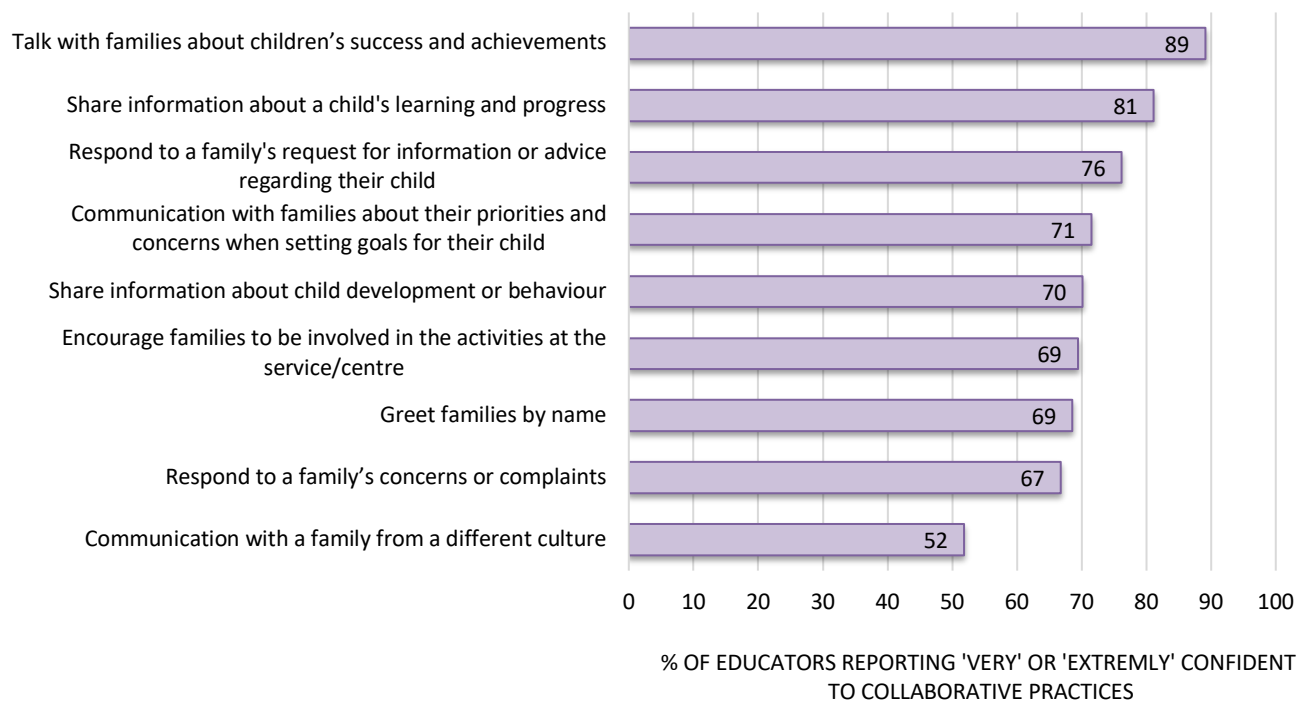
**Educator Confidence**

Educators rated their confidence in nine basic skills associated with collaborative practice, and results were generally high and positive. Sixty percent of surveyed educators reported *very confident* or *extremely confident* in six or more of the basic skills. Specifically, 89% of educators

reported feeling *very confident* or *extremely confident* to communicate children’s success and achievements and 81% reported feeling *very confident* or *extremely confident* to share information about children’s learning and progress. Fewer numbers reported feeling confident to communicate with culturally diverse families (52%), respond to concerns or complaints (67%), greet families by name (69%) and encourage family involvement (69%). Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of educator responses.

**Figure 2**

*Percentage of educator self-rated confidence in skills relating to collaborative practice with families (n=318)*



**Educator Training**

A large majority (87%) of educators had undertaken previous training in collaborating with families. Educators were asked to rate from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* whether this training had prepared them well to work with families. Overall, 52% felt their training prepared them to work with families. Educators were also asked to rank their preferred mode of delivery for future training from *most preferred* to *least preferred*. Forty-six percent ranked face-to-face training as the most preferred option. On-the-job coaching was the most preferred option by 25% of the sample, followed by online training (19%) and a mixture of online and face-to-face training (18%). The second

most preferred options by individual respondents were, in order: on-the-job coaching and support (36%), a mixture of online and face-to-face training (31%), face-to-face alone (18%), and online alone (11%).

Ninety-eight percent of educators reported a need for training that focused on working with families. Of those, 81% reported a need for more training on working with families with a child with behavioural or developmental concerns, 72% for how to respond to parents showing aggressive or distressing behaviour, 62% for working with families who have a mental illness, and 60% for working with families from diverse backgrounds.

Fifty-four educators responded to an optional question “Is there anything else that we need to know to support you to work collaboratively with families?” Thirty-nine percent of the comments were suggestions about training content such as “Training should include practical advice and keep in mind time restraints” and “Training such as role playing, that involves talking to families about difficult situations such as biting”.

### **Focus Groups**

Parent and educator focus groups’ responses have been combined to illustrate key themes (a) enablers of collaboration, (b) challenges to collaboration, and (c) enhancing collaboration.

#### ***Enablers to Collaboration***

Overall, parents and educators reported overwhelming positive experiences working together. For parents, being greeted by name demonstrated educators’ willingness to get to know their family and made them feel welcome. Educators reported using formal and informal strategies to actively engage families. They highlighted the importance of early engagement activities (such as orientation tours, home visits and formal meetings) to establish relationships with parents, as well as regular and ongoing contact with families to maintain relationships over time. The following parent quote exemplifies the importance of making families feel welcome and building relationships over time:

They really understand your child and every time she talks to me she’s like “We had a better day today, better than last week”, and it’s not just a fluffy conversation that you’re having at the end of the day, like they actually really, like you know that they understand your kid, and it’s the informal chats, I think that’s the most important and valuable thing really.

Both educators and parents recognised the importance of respecting parents’ knowledge of their child and acknowledging families as their child’s first teacher. As one parent said: “I know I

could talk about the concerns I had with my child and what I wanted him to achieve throughout the year.”

Educators spoke about seeking to understand and respect individual families’ values and cultures and incorporating this as much as possible. One parent said:

They asked if it was okay for my son to participate in the Easter parade... and I said, “Yeah, that’s fine.” Then in Ramadan they had a prayer rug and some Ramadan things for our holy month of fasting... and then on Eid they said, “Hope some of you have a happy Eid,”... I’m very grateful... they’ve been very respectful and accommodating for our family.

Parents and educators spoke very positively about the use of photos, portfolios and online platforms for clear and accessible information about child learning. Parents found these tools helpful when having conversations with their children about their learning, as well as involving fathers and other family members.

Parents were confident to seek educator advice on topics such as behaviour management, sleeping and eating routines. Information about parenting courses and events were often provided in ECEC newsletters. Parents expressed interest in more information and support from educators on a greater range of topics such as child settling, fussy eating, typical development, emotional regulation, age appropriate play behaviour and social interaction. Educators stressed the importance of building relationships with families as a foundation for providing general parenting advice, including information to parents about how to access further health and education services. One educator explained:

Being in a professional field you have information that you can support families with if they're willing to take that on, not crossing the boundaries of them being the first educators and the primary carers and support to their children, but also offering knowledge, and you can do that quite subtly with families by giving advice and pointing them in the right direction for things and building a trusting relationship so that they know that they can come and ask you about certain things.

### ***Challenges to Collaboration***

Educators in each of the focus groups reported dealing with difficult situations and raising concerns with parents was a substantial challenge. Situations discussed included managing violent or aggressive parental behaviour, raising concerns with families about their child’s development or

behaviour, and talking to parents about their child biting or being bitten. Organisational barriers including class size, staff time and ratios were raised by both educators and parents as potentially impacting on the educator-parent relationship and communication. As one educator said:

The more children you have, our groups are 33 now, the less portion of time you can allocate to each family and I find that very frustrating. I think it's just so important to develop those relationships right from the beginning and we just haven't got the time to do it as well as what we could.

Building trusting relationships with families who face challenges or who have had negative experiences with health or education services in the past (e.g., parents engaged with child protection, asylum seekers and refugees and parents with disabilities) was seen as challenging. Other common difficulties experienced by educators included (a) communicating about child learning goals and the VEYLD in a way that parents understand; (b) managing expectations about the educator's role, qualifications and experience; and (c) explaining play-based learning.

Parents gave examples of occasions where they were not thoroughly informed about changes to policies or how the service had responded to a concern they raised. In some cases, parents reported the service had responded to their concern in a way that was not aligned with their beliefs, preferences and values. The service response and lack of effective communication was a reason for families moving their child to different ECEC providers.

A further challenge to collaboration identified by educators was inadequate training in how to work with families. Educators generally reported their pre-service training did not prepare them for working collaboratively with families. Although some educators stated family-centred practice and collaborative partnerships were mentioned throughout their course content, it was not clear how this was done in practice until they commenced working. Educators felt unprepared for having difficult conversations with families, such as raising concerns about a child's development and managing difficult situations such as aggressive behaviour from parents. Similarly, both educators and parents thought early graduates could have difficulty communicating with parents. As one educator explained: "as a student you can't sit in on these kind of conversations... so the first time you need to have one you're kind of flying by the seat of your pants."

Educators said it was common for one or two people from the team to attend a training event, and report back to the larger group. The majority of educators were not aware of any training or professional development to support collaborative practice working with families, with one educator stating: "There was no training on how to talk to a parent when you had a big issue to

raise, none of that stuff. And even now in all the in-services that I've done over many years, it's really rare."

### ***Enhancing Collaboration***

When asked what would help them improve collaboration with families, educators expressed a need for training which teaches how to (a) build collaborative relationships, (b) handle challenging conversations such as raising concerns about a child's development or responding to a parent's concern, (c) effectively respond to someone showing aggressive and violent behaviour, and (d) effectively support the practice and skill development of educators. This quote was typical of many educators' comments about training needs: "We need to upskill each team member in day-to-day settings with practical solutions."

It was suggested that training content include video demonstrations of effective practice and opportunities for participants to practise those skills, and that learning be supported by downloadable quick reference guides and tip sheets. The establishment of effective coaching to build skills on the job by a trusted and supportive colleague or leader was discussed as a necessary key component. Finally, they stressed as critical the need for support from their employer to upskill by attending training and receiving on the job skill development activities.

### **Discussion**

According to Vuorinen (2020) much of the research on collaboration in early childhood services tends to focus on the views of policymakers and practitioners, with few investigations including parents' voices. Consequently, Vuorinen (2020) made a strong case for conducting research on parents' views about building relationships with staff.

We conducted a study with parents as well as educators to explore three areas related to collaborative partnerships. We examined parents' experience of collaborative practice, educators' confidence in working with parents, and educator's views about training on how to work with parents using both quantitative and qualitative methods with focus groups expanding on ways to achieve strong educator-family relationships. Although there is a rich source of qualitative (e.g., O'Connor et al., 2018) and quantitative (e.g., Chong & Lu, 2019) information in the published literature on parent-educator relationships there are fewer studies incorporating quantitative as well as qualitative enquiry.

In our surveys and focus groups, educators and parents gave many examples of positive communication. Being acknowledged and feeling welcome was also a strong theme for parents in Vuorinen's (2020) study. In addition, the generally positive parental attitudes we found are

consistent with the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (Harrison & Ungerer, 2005) in which parents expressed high levels of satisfaction with early education and care.

However, there were some aspects where parents were less positive. This tended to be about collaboration, for example, feeling like a partner and sharing information. Parents also identified specific areas for improvement such as more effective communication with their ECEC provider, better communication between the staff, and more information about their child's learning and development. Parents' need for such information could result from educators' hesitation to address these issues with parents, despite acknowledging the importance of doing so as O'Connor et al. (2018) reported.

Although there was a degree of correspondence between parent and educator responses, there were some differences illustrating less than optimal collaboration. For example, nearly 50% of parents reported they didn't have enough information on what their child was learning, yet 80% of staff said they were confident in their skills to share information about children's learning and progress. Even though staff express confidence, it is possible organisational and practical issues get in the way of opportunities for parent-educator communication. Coelho et al. (2019) cited factors such as the limited time for communication at drop off and pick up times as both educators and parents feel rushed during these periods. An Australian case study also pointed to a discrepancy between skills and application with no evidence of a true partnership despite identified performance standards being met (Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). In our study, both educators and parents acknowledged system and organisational factors that positively affect collaboration and communication such as the importance of effective teams. They also mentioned challenges such as limited staff availability to have conversations with families, rotating staff, limited time and lack of a private space to have private conversations.

Educators' confidence was high for most of the basic skills associated with collaborative practice. Less confidence was expressed for responding to parental concerns and complaints and working with families from culturally diverse backgrounds. According to Serpell and Mashburn (2012), a more responsive environment for parent-educator partnerships is created when educators seek knowledge from parents about parenting practices, and this is particularly so when working with culturally and socially diverse families. In our survey, 40% of parents did not think staff sought and valued their opinions and ideas, and nearly 50% did not think their priorities and interests were considered when setting goals. Furthermore, nearly half of the educators reported low confidence in working with families from culturally diverse backgrounds. These and other findings point to the need for training and support for working in partnership with parents.

The majority of educators said they had received training in collaboration with families but only half felt prepared to work in that way, and 98% of them reported a need for further training. The study afforded a number of practical suggestions for training content. For example, parents noted the importance of educator support during transition times that are challenging for many children and families. Other research suggests transitions are an opportunity for educators to build an ongoing partnership with families and that educators would benefit from professional learning in how to support families during transitions (Swartz et al., 2016). In particular, educators are seeking practical training and on-the-job guidance to undertake the more challenging aspects of collaborating with families, such as raising and responding to concerns, communicating cross-culturally and how to respond when families become aggressive or violent. Interestingly, educators also acknowledged that elements of educator resilience, self-care and coping were important in responding to these challenges.

Sheridan et al. (2009) have written about process issues and research needs for professional development in the early childhood sector making an argument for basing professional development practices on well-conducted research. They also distinguished between two objectives for professional development. The first is about educators' skills, knowledge, dispositions and practice. The second is about promoting a culture for ongoing growth in individuals and systems. We propose to use the findings of the current study and other research we have conducted to focus on both of those objectives.

### **Practical Implications**

The practical implications outlined here are consistent with the objectives articulated by Sheridan et al. (2009). Based on the information reported, the relevant literature, and conclusions drawn by the researchers, we suggest the ECEC sector would benefit from a practice model to convert knowledge into application and improve partnerships with families. The ECEC sector has made significant gains in improving quality of services in recent years and is well placed to focus efforts on supporting educators to more effectively partner with families. A practice model developed by PRC is founded on relationship building principles and skills that contribute to collaborative relationships. Parents' needs and educators' ideas about how they prefer to receive information and learn new skills have been incorporated into the design of the model. A *Partnering with Parents* practice support system is being trialled with funding from the Victoria Department of Health and Human Services and the support of the Victoria Department of Education and Training and 19 Victoria ECEC services (Petrovic et al., 2019).

### **Limitations**



The perspectives of educators working in long day care services and families accessing long day care services are represented, but further study is recommended for understanding partnership with families in long day care/kindergarten combined, out of school hours care and family day care services. Forty-one percent of participants in the educator focus groups had a bachelor or higher qualification, compared with 11.9% of educators in the 2016 Census. Therefore, the focus group findings may be more reflective of the opinions of higher qualified educators than those with a certificate or diploma qualification.

Two-thirds of parent survey participants had a bachelor or higher qualification and 80% were women. Participating parents had access to the internet and sufficient English literacy skills to answer the questions. The focus groups were facilitated in English and interpreters were not involved. Therefore, this study cannot make conclusions about the perspectives of male caregivers; parents who have a lower qualification level; those with low English literacy skills; and those who do not have access to the internet. Furthermore, the majority of information was collected from Victorian informants; thus the data may not be representative of all Australian states or regional and remote Australia. Finally, themes from the focus group thematic analysis were not validated by a second researcher. It is recommended that this is conducted in further research.

### **Conclusion**

This study adds to our understanding of the experiences in ECEC of both parents and educators. The findings of this study indicate that, when parents and educators are asked about partnership their views coincide in some respects, but not all. These discrepancies arguably indicate gaps exist in day-to-day practice skills in partnering with families. A need for practice support and training is strongly indicated.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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<sup>i</sup> Parent is the term used for adults who are undertaking the parenting or caregiving role of children in their care. This includes biological parents, kinship carers, foster carers, guardians and adoptive parents.

<sup>ii</sup> This is a summary of our findings. Please contact the authors for a copy of the full report.