

## Social Networking and the Circulation of Resources

### INSIGHTS FROM PLAYGROUP PARTICIPANTS

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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)

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 girly-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)

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)

Me & my child

or

Us and our children?

Or

Watching & judging

Us and them?

Or

Participating and supporting?

Or

Hovering on the fringe?

### Parenting in the social spotlight

'Maternal self-monitoring through narrative practice thinly veils a heated competition between mothers'. When children conflict, mothers intervene: 'The kids completely ignore them, and it's clear that the mothers are really discussing and performing their values'. (Blackford 2004: 239)

Pick up and drop off times were key opportunities for surveillance. 'Joanne' noticed that one woman, a mother of three, spoke harshly to her children: "If I have to hear that voice yelling across the parking lot at those kids one more time I'm going to scream myself. You can hear her a mile away." (Caputo 2007: 186)

### Our Project

Mothers' and fathers' understanding of how best to foster children's learning and development (CLD) is a vital element in optimising children's learning

Our project focuses on how parents and caregivers access the kinds of resources which can assist them to support CLD.

*Parents' networks: The circulation of knowledge about children's literacy learning* (ARC Discovery, Nichols, Nixon & Rowsell with RAs Rainbird, Milroy & Ovsienko)

Three site study 2007-9

- **Site 1:** Rural community located on the fringe of the metropolitan area. New housing developments just commencing. Two playgroups offered in town.
- **Site 2:** Central hub and surrounding residential area of metropolitan local government district including large mall. Several playgroups offered within zone.
- **Site 3:** US town with high social contrast, home to a highly educated elite, a strong working-class black community and new arrivals from Latin America. No playgroups in the sample.

### Our questions

- How do resources circulate through immediate social interactions?
- How are resources spatially located?
- How are resources made available through digital environments?
- The interactions between all these elements.

### Key concepts

**Social Capital:** Material and immaterial resources that individuals and families are able to access through their social ties. (Horvat 2003: 323)

**Ecologies:** All elements in a system need to be considered in terms of their relationships. Extend focus on the relationship between home & school to encompass communities as educational sites (Good et al 1997, Neuman and Celano 2001)

### Project elements

- \*Observation
- \*Parent interviews
- \*Interviews with service providers
- Resource inventory & mapping
- Parent survey
- Web-site investigation
- Artefact collection
- Opportunistic information gathering

### Findings in progress: Role of the social network for parents of preschoolers

- Empathy
- Acceptance
- Sounding board
- Sharing childcare
- Tips

Professionals are more valued for information and advice.

### Social cohesion in a playgroup

That's why I think we sort of click. Because we're not sort of out to – we're not snobby people. You're just the run of the mill. You talk amongst each other and we all sort of – yeah. There doesn't seem to be too much cattiness. You're just plodding along mothers and trying to do the best you can and help out. If questions arise, everybody puts their two cents in maybe. Like it just depends on who talks to who and stuff like that. (Mother, Site 1)

### Obstacles to supportive social networking

- Perceptions of being judged (eg too strict, not strict enough)
- Feelings of not belonging
- Competitiveness focused on children as signs of the parent's success
- Focus on parent-child interaction to exclusion of adults interacting with peers

### The 'non-average' child and a parent's dilemma

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", [...]

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**. (Mother, site 2)

### Developmental norms in mainstream parenting advice

#### What can I expect in the first five years?

Here are just a few of the important things your child might achieve in language development between three months and five years.

#### 3-12 months

In this period, your baby will most likely coo and laugh, play with sounds and begin to communicate with gestures. **Babbling** is an important developmental stage during the first year and, for many children, words are beginning to form by around 12 months.

Find out more about [language development from 3-12 months](#).

#### 12-18 months

During this time, the first words usually appear (these one-word utterances are rich with meaning) – by 18 months babies use around 50 words. Babies can understand more than they say, though, and will be able to follow simple instructions and understand you when you say 'no' (although they won't always obey!).

[http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/language\\_development.html](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/language_development.html)

### The 'misbehaving child' & the self-judging parent

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 ... We did a thing and as we went around the circle, you know, I'm saying "I'm having problems with Nathan 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" (Site 1 Playgroup organiser)

## Fathers in the parents' network

- Perceived as outside women's experience
- Lack of openness to/with men
- Can be valued mentors
- Fathers looking for connection with other parents

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)

The women I've interacted with, or the fathers, were very uncomfortable talking about the things that **with [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)

I would speak with a friend or someone who has a significant role in their lives, for example, with [child] it's his guitar teacher. **I discuss a lot of things about [child] with his guitar teacher**. He's the same age as me, he has three boys, he's divorced and he's remarried but **he just sort of sees the world the same way I do** but he's been through a lot more because his kids are older, so I talk to him a lot. (Mother, site 3)

## Closing Thoughts

- **Fostering 'us and our children' cultures**
  - Relaxing the 'sole responsibility' pressure
  - Design activities and spaces for adult socialising/collaboration
- **Awareness of how norms are produced/reinforced**
  - Is there one right way for parents/children to do something?
  - Is there a non-written code of dress or conduct?
  - Are parents/children allowed to have a 'bad day'?
  - Is mother the norm for parent?
- **Safe spaces for sharing the realities of parenting**
  - Experienced elders' stories are powerful
  - Descriptions elicit sharing; prescriptions are silencing
  - Advice is everywhere – support is precious and rare

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