



How Communities Can Better Support Parents: Findings from an Effective Parenting Expo

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How Communities Can Better Support Parents: Findings from an Effective Parenting Expo

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This article focuses on identifying how communities can better support parents, families and young people. Participants at an Effective Parenting Expo (n=57) were surveyed about the value of the event, the challenges facing them as parents, and the changes that would significantly improve life for their family. This paper focuses on responses to one open-ended question, “Thinking of your community, what ONE change could be made to significantly improve life for your family?” Responses were coded into three key categories: Improved Sense of Community, Increased Support for Families and Safer Communities. These responses clearly demonstrate the importance that parents place on having a safe, cohesive and friendly community in which to raise their children. Unfortunately, with social capital, community interactions and connectedness declining, the challenge is how to reverse this trend and foster a stronger sense of community. Participants identified several changes they believed would build better communities, believing that free community activities, meeting places and practical parenting courses would better connect them with families in their own community. This research highlights the importance of community for family well-being, with parents identifying changes they believe will significantly improve life in their community for their family.

Key words: family, parents, support, community, social capital

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There can be little doubt that being a parent has always been both rewarding and challenging. Parenting in the 21st century, however, presents its own unique set of challenges. The immense popularity of TV shows such as “Super Nanny” which in height of its season attracted over one million viewers Australia wide per an episode (Publishing and Broadcasting Limited 2005) suggests that modern parents are actively seeking support and guidance. It has been emphasised by the founder of the popular “Triple P – Positive Parenting Programme that, thanks to changing societal norms, parenting today is more of a challenge than ever before:

Raising children is increasingly occurring in a broader social context of uncertainty and social change...the increasing mobility of the population means that many parents raise their children in relative social isolation from extended family support networks who in the past provided counsel and advice on child rearing matters”(Sanders, 2000, p.930)

More than physical distance from families, however, the changing nature of communities means that parents today are more isolated and alone than ever before. The communities of today differ markedly of those fifty years ago. The time when everybody knew their neighbours, had frequent conversations over the back fence and at the corner shop has disappeared and been replaced with limited community interactions, sophisticated burglar alarms and large, impersonal shopping centres. The combination of structural changes in neighbourhoods (Kingston, Mitchell, Florin & Stevenson, 1999), shifting patterns of family relationships (Sanders, 2000) and the high value placed on independence and privacy (Miller & Buys, 2004) and concerns for personal safety (Caiazza, 2005) ensure that community interaction is limited in today's society.

In explaining why and how people (and families) are losing the connection they once had with their communities, researchers have focused on identifying the factors that facilitate or inhibit community wellbeing and connectedness, otherwise known as “social capital” (Putnam, 1995; 2000). Social capital is a community asset best defined as “the connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Unfortunately, most modern communities have limited “stocks of social capital”, with these lower levels of social and community connectedness meaning that:

...families are on their own. Family privacy, economic prosperity, and mobility patterns all separate parents and children from traditional sources of support and feedback ... Isolation is contagious, we become estranged from each other and all families lose the social support of close and caring loved ones (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992, p. 94).

As people struggle to balance the competing demands of work, family and life in the 21st century, the social aspects of a community, the interactions and conversations between neighbours as they develop social networks (i.e., social capital), is missing. Subsequently, this increasingly individualistic culture moves the act of parenting away from the community spectre and into the realm of the individual (Garbarino, 1995). The question that arises, however, is whether parents view this decline in social connectedness and community involvement as an issue of concern. Indeed, whether and how the decline in social capital affect parents, families and young people has not been explicitly investigated, with researchers neglecting to directly ask parents what – if anything - they need and expect from their community. That is, does the community feature in the priorities and expectations of parents? This study aims to enhance our understanding of what parents (and families) need from their community. By identifying what factors parents need from their local community, and more importantly the changes they believe would significantly improve life for their family, the findings will provide invaluable insight about what parents believe they need from their community to be better parents.

Method

Participants

Attendees at a free Effective Parenting Expo, instigated and organised by the Aspley division of Rotary as part of their Rotary and Community Effective Parenting Partnership initiative, were surveyed about the value of the event, the challenges facing them as parents, and the changes that would significantly improve life for their family. Held on Saturday the 12th March 2005 at the Queensland University of Technology Carseldine campus, the Expo aimed to showcase various parental and family support services and development programmes, providing information and opportunities for parents and caregivers to enhance their parenting skills. The event consisted of four keynote speakers (representatives from Relationships Australia, Triple P Program, Focus on Family and Parenting Support), as well as numerous stalls providing information about recreational opportunities for children and formal parental support and development classes. An estimated 20,000 flyers were distributed into mailboxes advertising the half-day event, with advertisements in local newspapers, school newsletters and on local radio. Of the 240 people who attended the parenting expo, a total of 57 completed surveys were returned by participants to the researchers, resulting in a response rate of 24%.

Measures

To examine participants' perceptions of the day and general needs surrounding child and family supports, a brief survey instrument was developed to assess the value of the event, the challenges facing them as parents, and the changes that would significantly improve life for their family. This paper focuses on responses to one open-ended question, "Thinking of your community, what ONE change could be made to significantly improve life for your family?"

Data Analysis

Responses to the open-ended question were analysed using a thematic approach, which focuses on identifying themes and patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). By identifying and categorising data into key areas, we are able to focus on key issues and themes relating to parents experiences and expectations of their community. Responses were recorded relating to three key themes, Sense of Community, Increased Support for Families and Safer Communities.

Procedure

As the Expo was run in a large lecture theatre (seating 600), surveys and pens were placed on all the seats prior to start of the Expo. At the end of the day, participants were encouraged to evaluate the Expo by completing the survey. Participants were allowed 10 minutes to complete the survey, with an overhead explaining the purpose of the survey and that participation was voluntary. In order to encourage participation and ensure anonymity, participants were given a "door number" and told to enter that number on the questionnaire to enter a prize draw for a weekend away. Surveys were collected and the prize draw conducted.

Results

Demographics

Of the 57 survey participants, the majority were female (72%) and married (81%). The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 75 years of age with a mean age of approximately 40 years. Of the range of participants present on the day, 94% identified themselves as parents (see Figure 1). Most of the participants (74%) reporting having two to three children, with 47% of the children are aged from six to 12 years (see Figure 2). Only one participant identified herself as Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander. Almost half of the surveyed participants (47%) were residents of the suburbs of Albany Creek, Carseldine, Bracken Ridge and Aspley. Interestingly, attendance from suburbs high in socio-economic disadvantage was extremely low.

What one change to community would improve life for your family?

67% of participants (n=38) provided responses to the open-ended question, "Thinking of your community, what ONE change could be made to significantly improve life for your family?" These responses were coded into three key categories: Improved Sense of Community, Increased Support for Families and Safer Communities. Five participants provided responses that fall outside the three main themes, for example listing issues such as lack of public transport, need to decrease traffic and noise, and the influence of commercial media as factors that would improve their family's life. This article focuses on the three key themes mentioned by the majority of participants.

Improved Sense of Community

As Table 1 below illustrates, 13 parents commented on the need for an improved sense of community. Two clear sub-themes emerged from parents responses, with five parents believing that changes to the structural features of the community, such as providing "a meeting place", and the provision of services, such as having "community activities organised" would significantly improve live for their family. Eight parents commented on the importance of a sense of community to them, with one participant lamenting that "there's no sense of community in our street - we don't interact with our neighbours - don't even know them".

Table 1: Sense of Community

Community Activities/Meeting Place

A meeting place

Community activities organised

To see more support based community care

Meeting those in my own community has been so valuable

Providing more community service for parents and children.

Sense of Community

There's no sense of community in our street - we don't interact with our neighbours - don't even know them.

More community based I think would bring more together

Patience, understanding, respect

Stronger community values programs

Stronger networking

That people talked to one another more! Utopia (and not just because they got something new to show) That schools and learning are integrated within the community especially the ethnic community and older citizens. In one word what I know would improve the life of my family is if all children were taught more RESPECT.

I am very happy with my community, our schools are very child/family focused. The State School is very focussed on education as well as family units.

Increased Support for Families

As Table 2 below emphasises, 13 parents commented on the need for increased support for families. Their responses can be categorised into three key sub-themes, specifically free activities, courses and support for families, and societal change. Three parents commented on the need for free activities for families, with one parent pointing out how important it is to *“get the young kids out there with some good clean, healthy activities for kids. In our area the kids just roam around, there is nothing to do!”*. Comments from three parents were coded into the second sub-theme, courses and support for families, with one parent arguing for making *“positive parenting courses (focussing on anger management) compulsory for all parents”*. The third sub-theme, societal change, illustrates how parents (n=7) believe that parenting today is more difficult, what with balancing the competing demands of work and family, higher divorce rates and changing perspectives on the rights of parents and children.

Table 2: Increased Support for Families

Free Activities for Families

Get the young kids out there with some good clean, healthy activities for kids. In our area the kids just roam around, there is nothing to do!

More free activities - such as life be in it for the school aged children. (4-12) years. In local parks and communities.

Activities for children - free or low cost

Courses and Support for Families

Positive parenting courses (focussing on anger management) compulsory for all parents.

Positive parenting programs and anger/emotion control like that provided by the Men's Information Support Association at Strathpine (it could be compulsory it should be)

Family counselling accessibility

Societal Support and Changes

More support and value given to stay-at-home mothers - recognition for contributions to families and communities and voluntary organisations.

More time for family, less time for work.

More time with family - people are too busy working

More parents becoming involved with their child's schooling

Taking away the court environment in dealing with family law issues.

Support for children dealing with issues i.e. emotional anger relating to separation of parents

Give parents our rights back-the right to fairly discipline our children, instead of filling their heads with THEIR rights and in fact most of today's kids do when asked to obey house rules. They all have a phone number given at school about their rights.

Safer Communities

As Table 3 below emphasises, seven parents commented on the need for safer communities, where their children could safely play and interact with others. These comments highlight the importance of the structural aspects of neighbourhoods, and the importance parents place on playgrounds and parks for all their children. One parent suggested that playgrounds should be designed to cater for the needs of the entire family, so that parents can take their children of all ages to the one place and enjoy being together, *“Making our parks more safe and fun for our children. Maybe a park with skate park, BMX, play equipment and covered areas all the one park so that more parents could take all their children there. Whatever their age”*.

Table 3: Safer Communities

A safe environment for the children to play.

Better policing of youth in the area regarding involvement in crime, drinking, drugs, smoking, truancy from school, graffiti.

Having more interaction socially in a safer environment.

Having trustworthy people who could mind our children from time to time and for it to be affordable

Making our parks more safe and fun for our children. Maybe a park with skate park, BMX, play equipment and covered areas all the one park so that more parents could take all their children there. Whatever their age.

Our neighbourhood community is about 12 years old, we are starting to notice the children are "becoming teenagers" there is more vandalism in the playground.

Safer community, being able to let your kids go out and play and know that they are safe

Discussion

This research, designed to identify what support participants at an effective parenting expo need from their community, powerfully illustrates just how important of sense of community, or social capital, is for families. Analysis of the open ended question “Thinking of your community, what ONE change could be made to significantly improve life for their family” identified three clear themes that illustrate the overarching concerns of parents today, specifically Improved Sense of Community, Increased Support for Families and Safer Communities. We discuss the implications and importance of each theme for families, communities and nations, identifying key recommendations and potential interventions that may facilitate the development of social capital and help communities better met the needs of families.

Improved Sense of Community

First, it is clear that sense of community and social connectedness is important to families. Unfortunately, these days, communities are typified by increasing isolation and low social capital, characteristics and a lack of social cohesiveness (Putnam, 1995, 2000). This research has demonstrated that whilst the term “social capital” is not part of their regular discourse, many parents are actually seeking social capital, believing that having good neighbours and a strong sense of community would significantly improve life for their family. With recent research suggesting that the characteristics of a neighbourhood may determine children’s wellbeing, these Queensland parents are right to believe that a greater sense of community would significantly improve life for their family. In America, Silk, Sessa, Morris, Steinberg and Avenevoli et al. (2004) found that living in an involved and connected community mitigated the negative impacts of harsh maternal parenting on children’s wellbeing and behaviour in school. Harsh and negative maternal parenting was directly related to teacher’s reports of children’s aggressive and acting-out behaviour *except* when children described their neighbourhood positively (as measured by responses to questions such as “*I like to play with the kids who live on my block*” and “*we talk to our neighbours*”). These findings led Silk et al. (2004) to conclude that the “positive social features of a neighborhood may serve a protective role for children, moderating the influence of hostility within the family environment” (p142, 2004). Similarly, Runyan et al. (1998) found that in a sample of 6000 high risk children, defined as living in unfavourable social or economic environments, the best predictor of positive child functioning was social capital, particularly their mother perceptions of personal and neighbourhood support. Unfortunately, this research suggests that whilst Queensland parents view sense of community as an essential component of effective parenting, most perceive their own community as lacking in this dimension, with one parent commenting, “*there’s no sense of community in our street - we don’t interact with our neighbours - don’t even know them*”.

Yet, whilst participants in this study clearly view the concept of social capital, community engagement, participation and interactions as something they as parents want, at least one parent describes it as unattainable, as is highlighted by their use of the word “Utopia” below.

That people talked to one another more! Utopia (and not just because they got something new to show). That schools and learning are integrated within the community especially the ethnic community and older citizens. In one word what I know would improve the life of my family is if all children were taught more RESPECT.

The idea that increased social interaction is perceived as something that cannot be realistically achieved or expected in modern communities is concerning, and raises an interesting question for future research: how 'real' or plausible is the idea of healthy social capital to parents in Australian communities, and how can we best encourage social interactions and build social capital? With Power and Eheart (2001) commenting that, "families benefit when they live in a community with a physical structure that facilitates caring, a social network that forms circles of care to meet their many and varied needs, and a shared purpose that community members work to achieve" (p.732), there can be little doubt that building social capital in Australian communities – perhaps through the increased provision of free community activities and meeting places as participants suggested - would be extremely beneficial for parents.

Increased Support for Families

The second key theme identified was that parents strongly felt that increased family support would be conducive to improving life for their families, specifying the value of free activities for families, courses and support, and societal change. Perhaps predictably, as participants were attending an effective parenting expo, many expressed a desire for more free family activities and access to formal parenting courses. Importantly, parents in the current study responded in ways which suggested that they wanted to acquire formalised skills as a proactive measure as opposed a reactive one, reflecting Sanders et al. (1999) argument that parents attend formal training because of their "concern about the prevalence of behavioural and emotional problems in children" (p.105). Indeed, one parent felt so strongly about the importance of this preparedness that they recommended that parenting skills classes should be compulsory, *"positive parenting programs and anger/emotion control like that provided by the Men's Information Support Association at Strathpine (it could be compulsory it should be)*.

Concerningly, another key theme related to societal changes in terms of the amount of time - or rather the lack of time- parents feel they have to spend with their children. Parents believed that having more time to spend with their families would significantly improve life for them, with one commenting *"More time with family - people are too busy working"*. This result is of little surprise, as studies have shown that leisure time is dwindling in today's society, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics reporting that;

Increasingly, families with children under 15 years have both parents in paid work. For many, this introduces on-going challenges in balancing their family responsibilities and work commitments. Between 1988 and 1998, the proportion of couple families with children under 15, where both parents worked increased from 50% to 56% (ABS, 1999).

It is pertinent to note that this data was collected in 1997, meaning it is likely that this figure is even higher now. On the other hand, one parent commented that their needed to be *“more support and value given to stay-at-home mothers - recognition for contributions to families and communities and voluntary organisations”*. Such comments illustrate the changing norms in Australian society and the conflicting pressures facing parents today, who must decide whether working full-time, part-time or staying at home with their children is the best option for them and their family.

Safer Communities

The third and final key theme was Safer Communities. This is of little surprise in light of recent media attention being focused on child safety and incidents such as the abduction of twelve year old Daniel Morcombe on a Sunday afternoon from a bus-stop on Queensland's Sunshine Coast last year (<http://www.danielmorcombe.com.au/>, accessed September 1, 2005). The results from the current study demonstrate that is a distinct concern from parents about the safety of communities, with parents wanting communities to be safe enough for children engage in recreational behaviours unattended. For example, one parent commented on the need for a *“safer community, being able to let your kids go out and play and know that they are safe”*., as is reflected by both high profile child-kidnappings, such as that of Daniel Morcombe, and the comments identified in this research, many parents – perhaps justifiably - perceive their own communities as being unsafe. Unfortunately, researchers have linked parents' perceptions of unsafe neighbourhoods with inconsistency in parenting practices.

As mothers perceive their neighborhood as more unsafe, they may vacillate between authoritarian disciplinary practices of strict rule enforcement, which have been shown to be effective in unsafe neighborhoods, and more permissive strategies, not wanting to restrict or limit their children's natural tendencies to explore at such a young age (Hill & Herman-Stahl, 2002, p. 216).

The results of the current study raise the possibility that parents may feel the need to adapt their own parenting practices to suit the perceived decline in safety offered by their own communities. Indeed, recent reports have suggested that this adaptation may emerge in the form of personal Global Positioning Systems (GPS) tracking devices which are currently on the market, with some advocating that children and older people with Alzheimer's disease wear wrist-watches containing GPS trackers (ABC Radio National, 2001). These devices can be designed so that they alert the person monitoring the device if the wearer has traversed outside a designated spatial boundary, with moves to trial devices of this nature which can be implanted subcutaneously (i.e., beneath the skin), ensuring that the wearer can never stray (The Economist, 2002, p.66). Katz (2001) suggests that this social change can be linked to the climate of fear which is propagated by media and government, noting that little

research has been undertaken which seeks to understand whether this fear is founded. Clearly, understanding parental perceptions of community safety and the measures parents do, could and should take to ensure their child's safety, such as the acceptability, viability and ethics of having children wear GPS trackers, are interesting avenues for further research.

Overall, the current research has demonstrated that participants at the Rotary Effective Parenting expo describe their local community as being extremely valuable to them as parents, acknowledging the need for a cohesive and safe community in which to raise their children. There can be little doubt, however, that parents are highly concerned about the current state of their local community, expressing a strong desire for an improved sense of community, increased support for families and a safer community. In academic terminology, what parents are seeking is a community with high stocks of social capital. Fortuitously, social capital is a common good within the communities, and it exists in and subsequently can be built up or diminished, depending on whether it is nurtured or not (Jack & Jordan, 1999, p.243). Thus, to build social capital, and the stronger sense of community they are seeking, parents need to make a conscious decision to become active, involved and engaged citizens. The paradox, of course, is that to foster social capital and the safer, more interconnected community they are seeking, people may have to change their current behaviours and make a conscious choice to become more involved with their neighbours and in their local communities. One way to help build social capital and networks among people is ensuring that there are regular community and family events, such as the Rotary Effective Parenting expo, which can act not only as a conduit for information and support but also as a forum which enables parents to actively engage in their communities and to ultimately give them a voice in community affairs.

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