



MINISTRY OF
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Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora

Early childhood centres and family resilience

Executive summary

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Purpose

This report describes the main findings of the *Early Childhood Centres and Family Resilience Study*. The study examined whether early childhood (EC) centres were perceived by participants to have supported the development of family resilience and helped them cope with challenging and stressful times, and if so, how.

Background

The study took an ecological perspective on family resilience, developing a model by integrating and synthesising previous research and theory with data from the study. Family resilience was constructed as embedded in the family microsystem, but with links to other systems, particularly the EC centre microsystem, and also to external support and advisory agencies. All of these micro-, meso- and exo-systems are embedded in a wider macrosystem of social policies and societal values.

This study involved an in-depth analysis of qualitative case studies of three EC centres in areas of high deprivation, which were identified as examples of good practice in working with low-income families. A research team from the Children's Issues Centre in Dunedin was contracted to conduct the research by the Ministry of Social Development as part of the Ministry's *Family Dynamics Research Programme*.

The participants in the study included 28 low-income families with a child attending an EC centre – 10 families from Dunedin, 11 from Wellington and seven from Gisborne. There were three EC teachers in each of two centres (kindergartens) and six in the third centre (a childcare centre). Staff from five key advisory support agencies also participated in the study.

Researchers spent a month carrying out intensive data collection at each centre. They observed the centre programme, carried out focus group interviews with EC staff and individual interviews with parents/whānau and staff from support agencies. EC teachers also wrote reflective records about their own practice in relation to families.

Findings

Families/whānau found many of the practices identified within the EC centres supportive. All three EC centres in this study provided high standards of EC education and care, and demonstrated a strong commitment to providing quality education for children. In addition, their practice was focused on families/whānau and offered concern and support for them.

EC centres were identified by parents as places where they felt safe, had established trusted relationships and where there was a stable base of families and children who attended on a regular basis. Parents were particularly reassured by the feeling that their children were in a stimulating and responsive EC environment that gave them time to develop their own social and human capital.

Families who were demonstrating resilience had several strategies and attitudes in place:

- they had strong, trusting relationships both within their immediate family and their wider whānau, as well as friends or others to turn to in difficult times

- they were able to see adverse situations as problem solving and “character forming” occasions, where a positive attitude was important
- they had skills and abilities to access the knowledge and support they needed when they needed it.

Connection and belonging within a community of others outside the immediate family was also a key strategy for wellbeing and resiliency for the families. Agencies and government support, such as income and housing, were seen as important in supplying the provisions needed to assist in all of the above factors.

Positive, trusting, known, stable relationships were the basis for building strong links between parents, others in the EC centre and wider support agencies. All of the participants were able to identify the factors that supported their relationships and empowered them to ask for, or accept, support for themselves and their families/whānau. Likewise, they were able to identify the factors that created barriers for them. The place of supportive provisions (in both processes and structures) was continually emphasised. The EC centre was perceived to be “there” in the community, providing a central focus and a warm welcoming place, which was of inestimable importance to family/whānau and the community.

Policies that helped centres to work harmoniously with families included structural factors, such as favourable ratios and group size, well-trained, professional and stable staff and non-contact time. It was important for centres to provide responsive, reciprocal and warm relationships with families, which was much easier to do when the appropriate structural variables were in place.

One structural variable that was a barrier to supporting families was the lack of a private space for discussion, or a place for families to “hang out” together. Families preferred to have informal contact with staff rather than be offered formal educational/training opportunities.

EC centres were also an important mediator between families and external agencies, who could provide resources for families (including income support, employment opportunities, disability support, parenting advice, schools and other educational opportunities). EC centres had, in most cases, found ways of scaffolding parents’ interactions with other external agencies by:

- working co-operatively and sharing information with the agencies
- playing a mediating and advocacy role between families and agencies
- offering resources and information about the agencies.

Conclusions

It can be concluded from the results in this study that the EC centres in the study were places that supported family resilience, in a variety of ways. The relationships and attitudes of the families/whānau, EC staff and support agencies were key factors in providing support for family resiliency. The study revealed that the ability of EC centres and staff to provide support and assist the building of social capital depends on several key factors:

- the quality of relationships (mesosystem links) that EC staff have with families and other advisory support and social agencies
- the attitudes of EC staff and parents
- the structures, processes and resourcing of the provisions that EC centres and staff have access to.