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Family support within a child care centre: A case study

Rikki Maynard

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Family Support within a Child Care Centre: A Case Study

Rikki Maynard

A report submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science, Edith Cowan University.

Submitted (October, 2008)

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Family Support Within Childcare Centres: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

This review explored the effects of stress in the family environment and the role that family support plays in reducing this stress. Specifically, research concerning the role that child care workers play in providing support to families who utilise their services was examined. The literature showed that there are many stressors facing families today and that the experience of stress in the family environment can have a detrimental effect on children's developmental outcomes. While the literature showed that experiencing social support can reduce stress in the family environment, it was also found that many families face isolation from such forms of support. Family support delivered through existing services such as child care centres has been shown to help these families who are stressed and isolated from social supports. However, there is little research that examines the role that childcare workers play in providing support to families. Therefore, more research is needed to examine the role that child care workers play in providing support to families and the key interactions between workers and families that can generate this support.

Key words: family support, stress, child care, social support, child development
Family Support Within Childcare Centres: A Review of the Literature

Introduction

For many years, researchers have sought to understand how early life environments shape our development (Power & Hertzmant, 1997). A large portion of this research has focused on the immediate factor of the family environment in determining children’s outcomes, with poor family environments consistently linked to poor child outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Although this link between the quality of family environments and the developmental outcomes of children is widely recognised, many families experience difficulties that can impair their abilities to provide the high quality environments that facilitate the healthy development of children (Thompson & Uyeda, 2004). While some families are able to overcome these difficulties, others may require support in order to cope with the challenges of creating the sort of family life that leads to quality child rearing.

Traditionally, such support has been provided by extended family members, friends and neighbours, however many families face isolation from these types of supports (Healy & Darlington, 1999). The family support movement arose specifically as a means of helping families who lack those supports (Roditti, 1995). Family support describes a range of practices that aim to uphold and strengthen family functioning (Healy & Darlington, 1999). Family support strategies are varied however in the literature they are usually described as involving the provision of social and emotional support for families and caregivers and also caregiver education (Thompson & Uyeda, 2004).

The role that formalised child care service workers play in providing families with additional support has received some attention in the literature recently, however it is still an aspect of family support that is not fully understood (Duncan, Bowden & Smith, 2006). This review will examine the literature surrounding the various issues that families face and
connect this with the family support that child care workers provide in order to minimise the
effects of these stressors on the family environment.

Experience of Stress in the Family Environment

Most parents struggle at times with the pressures of parenting, however some parents experience added pressures that can have a debilitating effect on their parenting practices and the functioning of their families. As the family environment plays an integral role in children’s development, these stressors can in turn have an effect on the development of children who are raised in these distressed families (Bowes, et al., 2004; Webster-Stratton, 1990; Zubrick, Smith, Nicholson, Sanson & Jackiewicz, 2008).

There is a large body of literature that has examined the effects of individual stressors on family functioning and there are numerous issues that have been linked to negative environments for children’s development. For example, families in which a parent suffers from a mental illness, families who experience familial violence and families whose relationships are marked by conflict have been found to be marked by stress and more negative family environments than families that do not experience these same pressures (Sternberg, et al., 1993; Zubrick, et al., 2008). In addition, parents who have recently separated from their partners and parents who experience conflict between their work and family roles have been found to experience higher levels of stress, which has also been linked directly to poor family functioning (Alexander & Baxter, 2005; Webster-Stratton, 1990).

Mental Illness

Findings from the 2004-2005 Australian Bureau of Statistics’ National Health Survey indicate that 13 percent of Australian adults had experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress during the four weeks prior to participating in the study (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Given this percentage, it could be assumed that there are many Australian parents who are experiencing psychological distress.
A study was conducted by Billings and Moos (1983) in order to examine the effects of being raised by a parent who suffers from depression. When compared to the control group children, the children of parents experiencing depression were found to have more physical, psychological and behavioural problems and were more likely to use alcohol and other drugs. The families in which a parent experienced depression were found to be less cohesive and characterised by more conflict than the families in which a parent was not depressed. In addition the parents who experienced depression reported having more stress and less support than the parents who were not depressed (Billings & Moos, 1983). These findings highlight the idea that parents who experience mental illness can often experience increased strains which can affect their family environment, which in turn could affect children's development.

Familial Violence

Spousal violence is a serious problem that affects many families from a variety of backgrounds (Hughes & Huth-Bocks, 2007). This violence not only has an effect on the person who experiences the abuse, but also on children who grow up in families where this occurs (Hughes & Huth-Bocks, 2007). Negative child outcomes have been consistently found for children who witness spousal violence, however the effects of such violence can also have an indirect effect on children through the stress that often characterises the environment of such families (Hughes & Huth-Bocks, 2007).

Hughes and Huth-Bocks (2007) conducted a study to examine the incidence of stress amongst women who had experienced violence from their spouse and the effects of this stress on parenting and child outcomes. While not all of the women in the study were found to be experiencing stress, many were found to be moderately to highly stressed. Those that indicated such stress showed symptoms of mental illness and also participated in more negative parenting behaviours and the children of these women showed more emotional and behavioural problems. These findings highlight the role that domestic violence can play in
increasing stress in families and the negative outcomes for child rearing that can stem from this stress.

Relationship Conflict and Partner Separation

Sustained or extreme conflict between parents has been found to have negative effects on children’s development, with children raised in such situations experiencing more mental health and physical health problems than those who are not (Zubrick, et al., 2008). Such inter-parental conflict has been found to directly influence children’s development through the modelling of negative interactions (Zubrick, et al., 2008). However, in addition to this, inter-parental conflict can have an indirect effect on children’s development as extreme relationship conflicts can cause some parents to become distressed and this stress can impact upon their parenting practices, which in turn affects their children’s development (Zubrick, et al., 2008).

Relationship breakdown is also a common experience within families today and the experience of going through a separation can be extremely stressful for all family members (Maughan & McCarthy, 1997). For example, it has been found that mothers that have recently separated from their partners experienced more episodes of both minor stress and major stress than mothers who had partners (Webster-Stratton, 1990). This stress can also impact on parenting practices as recently separated parents have also been found to be less affectionate with their children and more irritable in their interactions with their children, which can in turn affect their children’s development (Webster-Stratton, 1990).

Work-Family Role Stress

Many parents currently combine work commitments with parenting commitments and many of these parents feel that having a work role as well as a parenting role is beneficial to themselves and their families (Alexander & Baxter, 2005). However, many others find that the demands of combining parenting and working can leave them feeling stressed and this is
especially common in parents who work longer hours, non-traditional hours such as weekends and non flexible hours (Alexander & Baxter, 2005).

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children has examined the varied characteristics of Australian families, including parents’ feelings about combining their parental responsibilities with working responsibilities (Gray & Sanson, 2005). The study follows two cohorts of children; half of which were aged three-19 months when recruited and the other half of the children were aged four to five years old when recruited. Ten thousand and ninety children and their families participated in the first data collection period, which was conducted during 2005, and this sample was said to be representative of the wider Australian population (Gray & Sanson, 2005).

With regards to parental employment status and wellbeing, the study examined how well parents were coping with combining work and family life and how often they felt rushed for time. Forty six percent of the working mothers and fathers who participated in the study were found to have problems coping and 44 percent of the mothers and 43 percent of the fathers expressed that they rushed for time (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2006). These findings suggest that combining work and family responsibilities is causing stress in many Australian parents.

Effects of Familial Stress on Child Development

While some of the previously discussed strains facing families have a direct impact on the family environment, they all also are associated with stress (Webster-Stratton, 1990). The impact of stress itself on the family environment has also been extensively researched and there is evidence that stress can have an effect on children’s neural development, parenting practices, attachment formation and the occurrence of child maltreatment (Cynader, 1994; Holden & Banez, 1996; McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; van Ijzendoorn, Goldberg, Kroonenberg & Frenkel, 1992; Webster-Stratton, 1990).
Neural Development

The experience of being reared in a stressful environment has been linked to impairment in brain development in infants (Cynader, 1994; McCain, et al., 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The development of the nervous system is particularly significant during the first few years of a child’s life and if a child experiences stress during this period, their nervous system can become wired to be overly responsive to stressful situations (McCain, et al., 2007). While short episodes of minor stress are not particularly damaging to an infant’s development, sustained or chronic stress can have a damaging effect on a child’s growing brain (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

The hormonal changes that occur in the body when a person is stressed can be damaging to an infant’s brain and this damage can be permanent (Cynader, 1994; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). When a person is stressed the body releases cortisol, a hormone that frees energy in the body in order to aid a fight or flight response. In order to free this energy, cortisol suppresses some bodily and brain functions that are not required in such a response, such as memory (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Evidence from animal research suggests that when an animal experiences chronic or sustained stress, the extreme levels of cortisol that are released can damage these brain and bodily functions and can also lower the animal’s threshold for experiencing stress in the future (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). While this idea is fairly new and the evidence has not been explored with regard to human infants, it is an issue of importance, as if the effects of sustained cortisol are similar for human infants, children who are raised in stressful environments may be experiencing irreversible damage to their nervous systems that could impact on many areas of their development.

Parenting Practices

The effects of stress on parenting practices or styles have been well established in the literature, with a large body of evidence linking the experience of stress to parents being more
irritable in their interactions with their children and employing more negative parenting strategies (Zubrick, et al., 2008). Webster-Stratton (1990) conducted a comprehensive review of the research on the effects of stress on parenting practices. For this review, Webster-Stratton discussed research that examined stress as a by-product of major life stressors, such as those discussed in the previous section. In this review, it was found that parents who experience stress, due to issues such as experiencing mental illness, marital discord and relationship separation, are more likely to use inappropriate forms of discipline, be more inconsistent in their parenting and more punitive in their interactions with their children.

While the review conducted by Webster-Stratton (1990) examined the impact of stress as a by-product of major life strains on parenting styles or practices, few studies have examined the role of minor stress brought on by the day-to-day struggles that many people face in their role as parents. Crnic and Greenberg (1990) conducted such a study in order to determine whether there was a similar link between negative parenting practices in parents who were experiencing minor stress as a result of parenting responsibilities as was found in previous studies involving parents with major life strains. It was hypothesised in this study that minor daily stresses could accumulate to cause stress in parents and that this could have an impact on parent-child relationships.

There were 74 mother-child pairs of participants in this study, with all of the children aged five years old. The mother participants completed a questionnaire regarding daily stressors, parenting, family functioning and their child's behaviour and the mother-child pairs were also observed in a laboratory. The observation phase of study involved observing the mother-child pairs' interactions during two situations; one free-play and one structured during which the mother-child pair were instructed to complete a problem solving task. The responses to the questionnaire were then compared to the interaction observations.
The results did not show a correlation between mothers’ reported stress and their interactions with their children during the observation phase, however higher levels of reported stress were found to be related to decreased levels of reported satisfaction with parenting and decreased levels of reported family functioning. Crnic and Greenberg (1990) thus concluded that day-to-day stressors had the potential for generating parental distress and family dysfunction, which can in turn have an effect on child development. The findings from both Crnic and Greenberg’s (1990) study and Webster-Stratton’s (1990) review show that stress, whether major or minor, can have an effect on parenting and family functioning, which can in turn affect children’s development.

Attachment

Attachment theory posits that the quality of early relationships between children and their caregivers has an impact on much of a child’s development, in particular their social and emotional development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). When young children are provided with responsive, warm and stable care, they are more likely to feel secure in these relationships with their caregivers. Due to this security, they show more trust towards this attachment figure and feel more comfortable to explore new environments, which fosters their learning (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). In contrast, when children experience unstable or nonresponsive care from their parents, these relationships are characterised by insecurity and children are more likely to distrust their caregiver, which can have a negative effect on their development of relationships in later life (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994).

Due to the importance of these attachments for children’s development, researchers have sought to understand the many variables that can have an effect on the quality and formation of these attachments. The role that parental stress plays in the development of attachments has been extensively researched and it is argued that parents who experience stress are less likely to be able to provide the type of care that facilitates secure attachments.
Van Ijzendoorn, et al. (1992), conducted a meta-analysis of the relevant literature in order to determine whether maternal distress or child problems have more of an effect on the type of attachment that is formed between a mother and their child. Thirty four studies were included in this analysis, all of which were conducted in North America and had used the Strange Situation procedure for assessing attachment styles. The results for each of these studies were then compared statistically. The analyses conducted showed that when mothers are distressed, there is an increased occurrence of their children being classified as having an insecure attachment with their mother (van Ijzendoorn, 1992).

This issue is of importance as researchers have linked insecure attachments in infancy to deficits in children’s social and emotional development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). For example, Simpson, Collins, Tran and Haydon (2007) recently reported the results of a longitudinal study that examined the role of early attachment security on emotional regulation in later relationships. The study involved 78 participants aged between 20 and 23 who had been a part of the Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation from Birth to Adulthood, were in romantic relationships and had been so for longer than four months. The participants and their partners completed self-reported relationship questionnaires and also participated in an observation exercise during which the couple had to work on a collaborative task.

As a part of the Minnesota Study, the participants’ attachments to their primary caregiver had been assessed using the Strange Situation method when the participants were twelve months old. Their social competency was assessed when they were grades one, two and three of school using reports from the participants’ school teachers. The participants were then interviewed when aged sixteen regarding their friendships. The data from these three phases of the Minnesota Study were then compared to each other and the data obtained from the relationship questionnaire and the observation task (Simpson, et al., 2007).
It was hypothesised that individuals who were classified as having a secure attachment to their caregiver in infancy would be rated as more socially competent by their teacher than those who had insecure attachments. In turn, it was hypothesised that the children that were rated as more socially competent would have stronger relationships at sixteen. It was then predicted that those who had stronger relationships at 16 would experience and express more positive emotions in their adult relationships. These hypotheses were supported by the data, leading Simpson, et al., (2007) to conclude that early attachment security is linked to the experience and expression of emotions in adult relationships. Given these findings and the link that has been found between the experience of parental stress and the occurrence of insecure attachments, it is apparent that efforts need to be made to reduce the experience of stress in parents.

Maltreatment

The causes of child maltreatment have been extensively researched and many studies have found that caregivers who are experiencing stress are more likely to be involved in the physical maltreatment of a child in their care than those who are not (Salzinger, Feldman, Hammer & Rosario, 1991). Holden and Banez (1996) conducted a study to determine whether this link between parental stress and maltreatment existed and also to see whether there were gender differences in this effect. Forty seven couples participated in the study all of which had varying histories with child maltreatment. Each member of the couple was administered two questionnaires, one designed to differentiate between those who had the potential to be abusive to their children and those who did not, and one to assess the parents' levels of stress. The results of these questionnaires showed that those parents who were stressed, had a greater potential to abuse their children and that there was no difference in this link between males and females (Holden & Banez, 1996)
This link between child maltreatment and caregiver stress is a noteworthy issue as the effects of maltreatment on children are extensive and can pervade into a child’s later life. For example, the experience of being abused as a child has been linked to an increased rate of mood disorders, substance abuse, aggressive behaviour and difficulties in relationships in later life (Maughan & McCarthy, 1997). Experiencing maltreatment can also have more immediate effects on a child. A study conducted by Shonk and Cicchetti (2001) examined some of these effects, in particular the rate of behavioural problems and deficits in social competencies that had been linked to maltreatment in earlier studies.

In this study, the behaviour, social competencies and school achievement of 146 children who had been maltreated were compared to that of 83 children who had no history of maltreatment. The participants’ behaviour, social competencies and school achievement were assessed within their school and also in a summer camp that all children attended. For the school assessments, information on these areas of interest was provided by the participants’ teachers who were blind to the children’s backgrounds and the purpose of the study. The summer camp data regarding these areas of interest was obtained from the trained camp counsellors who worked with the children at the camp. The camp counsellors were also blind to maltreatment histories of the children and the hypotheses of the study (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001).

The data that was collected showed that the children who had been maltreated displayed more signs of academic maladjustment and more behaviour problems than the children with no history of maltreatment. In particular, maltreated children had lower academic engagement, lower social competencies and lower ego resiliency than the non-maltreated children. From these findings, Shonk and Cicchetti (2001) concluded that the experience of maltreatment puts children at a greater risk for dropping out of school and for long-term social problems. Due to these findings of the negative role that maltreatment can
play in child development and the evidence that maltreatment is more likely to occur in families that are experiencing stress, it is evident that attention needs to be paid to reducing stress in parents and caregivers.

Social Support and Isolation

While the previous sections suggest a bleak future for families who are experiencing various familial strains and their associated stress, there are factors that can buffer families from the experience of stress and its harmful outcomes. In particular, experiencing social support provided by families and friends, whether practical support or emotional support, has been found to reduce stress in some parents who are experiencing strains (Healy & Darlington, 1999; Zubrick, et al., 2008). Many studies have demonstrated this link and others have also shown a link between social support and more appropriate parenting behaviours.

Crnic, Greenberg and Slough (1986) conducted a study to explore the role of social support in buffering the effects of stress. In this study 52 mother-infant pairs were interviewed when the infant was one month old, observed and interviewed when the infant was eight months old and observed and the infants’ development assessed when the infant was 12 months old. The interview conducted when the infant was one month old collected information on the mothers’ experiences of stress and social support. The interview conducted when the infant was eight months old collected information on the mothers’ attitudes to parenting and on the infants’ temperament. The observations that were conducted were used to assess the mothers’ and infants’ interactions.

The results from the data collected in this study showed a relationship between stress and mother and infant outcomes. In particular, early stress was related to less positive maternal affect, less infant compliance and less secure attachment at 12 months. However, a relationship was also shown between social support and mother and infant outcomes, with social support being related to more positive functioning for the mother and infant, less infant
noncompliance and more secure attachments between the infant and mother. From these findings, Crnic, et al. (1986), concluded that social support can moderate maternal stress and act as a buffer against negative outcomes in both mothers and their infants.

Burchinal, Follmer and Bryant (1996) conducted a study to investigate whether women with large support networks were more warm and responsive in their interactions with their infants. Burchinal, et al. (1996) suggest that social support influences children’s development by reducing stress in the parent and thus reducing the negative effects that stress has on parenting practices. Sixty two African American families participated in the study, all of whom were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Longitudinal assessments of the mothers’ social networks, the families’ structure, the quality of the home environment, the interactions between the mothers’ and their infants, the infants’ cognitive development and the infants’ temperament were conducted.

From these assessments, it was found that the size of the mothers’ social networks was related to more positive parenting styles and the quality of the home environment. Women that reported larger networks were more responsive to their children and provided more stimulating home environments for their infants (Burchinal, 1996). These findings and the findings of Crnic, et al. (1986), support the idea that social support can act as a buffer for parents who are experiencing stress, thereby improving the family environment and in turn improving child outcomes.

While social support can act as a buffer for families experiencing stress, many people are isolated from such forms of support for a variety of reasons (Healy & Darlington, 1999). For example, migration can reduce the availability of family members and friends as providers of support for parents who are facing stress (Balock, 2003; Powell, 1997). Additionally, communities tend to be more disjointed and people tend to feel less connected to their community than in the past (Powell, 1997). The Longitudinal Study of Australian
Family Support

Children, discussed previously, also obtained data on parents' feelings of being supported socially and being isolated from their communities and the data show that many Australian parents are not receiving adequate social support (Zubrick, et al., 2008). Approximately one quarter of the parents in both the infant cohort and the child cohort reported feeling a lack of support from families and friends and parents who reported more life stress also reported lower feelings of support than those who reported less stress (Zubrick, et al., 2008). Given the demonstrated negative effects of parental stress on the family environment and child development and the evidence that social support can reduce parental stress, it is evident that parents who are isolated from traditional sources of social support will need support from other sources.

Family Support

The family support movement arose as a means of meeting the needs of these families who lack the traditional forms of support or are socially isolated from their communities (Roditti, 1995). While family support is often thought of as specific programs delivered to families in need, it is also an approach that is utilised by many establishments that service families such as child care centres, schools and health services in order to uphold and strengthen family functioning (Healy & Darlington, 1999; Thompson & Uyeda, 2004). There are many varied strategies that are utilised by workers who deliver family support, however in the literature the strategies that have received the most attention are those that involve the provision of social and emotional support for families and also caregiver education (Thompson & Uyeda, 2004).

The family support approach is characterised by a set of goals or principles that guide the way support is delivered and also guide the way families that use these services are valued. Services that provide family support work to build relationships with families that focus on partnership, respect and equality (Powell, 1997; Roditti, 1995; Thompson & Uyeda,
These services also recognise and focus on families' existing strengths and aim to enhance these strengths in order to reinforce family functioning and build resilience (Miller, Replogle & Weiss, 1995; Mulroney, 1998; Roditti, 1995). Services that provide family support also have a dedication to the process of empowerment and are ecological in approach, recognising the contexts in which families exist and participate (Miller, et al., 1995; Thompson & Uyeda, 2004). These services take a preventative approach but also promote the wellbeing of the families who utilise their service (Miller, et al., 1995; Mulroney, 1998; Thompson & Uyeda, 2004). Finally, services that provide family support promote equality and respect for diversity and recognise that all families need supports (Miller, et al., 1995; Powell, 1997; Roditti, 1995; Thompson & Uyeda, 2004).

Family Support in Child Care

As has been stated, as well as being thought of as specific programs delivered to families in need, family support is also an approach that is utilised by many establishments including child care services in order to strengthen families that are facing stress (Healy & Darlington, 1999; Thompson & Uyeda, 2004). The literature regarding family support however, has tended to focus solely on family support programs and little attention has been paid to the role that childcare workers play in providing support to families as a part of their service (Duncan, Bowden & Smith, 2006).

Between 1999 and 2004, the number of children attending childcare in Australia rose dramatically from 577,500 to 752,800 (Department of Family and Community Services, 2005). When families use childcare services, family members usually attend the centre twice a day, at drop off and pick up times. This gives childcare workers and family members opportunities to build relationships with one another that could foster the delivery of support (Roditti, 1995). With large numbers of families using childcare and with many families being isolated from traditional forms of support, these services are an invaluable resource for
reaching families who may be in need of support (Healy & Darlington, 1999; Roditti, 1995). Due to this, the role that child care workers can play in providing support to families is an important topic of study.

While there is little research regarding the role that child care workers play in providing support, it has been speculated that childcare workers can also provide family support by teaching parents about child development and parent-child relationships and by providing parents with space from their children when they are stressed (Roditti, 1995). Additionally, in the National Childcare Accreditation Council’s principles for quality practice, there are principles relating to family support, such as building relationships with families through encouraging parent participation in the service, fostering effective communication with families and respecting the diverse backgrounds of children (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2006). Although this information is suggestive of the ways in which child care workers provide family support, research needs to be conducted in order to gain rich, detailed information about both childcare workers’ experiences in supporting families and also family members’ experiences of being supported.

Duncan, et al., (2006), conducted such research in order to examine the role of early childhood centre workers in providing family support and rich and detailed data was obtained from this study. The research utilised case studies in order to examine three early childhood centres in New Zealand, two of which were kindergartens and one was a child care centre. All centres were located in areas of high deprivation. Supporting other case study approaches (e.g., Saracho, 2008; Stake, 1995; Stevenson, 2004; Yin, 2003) their case study research involved the exploration of an issue or phenomena through one or more settings or contexts, or cases, and resulted in a rich description of the issues as they occurred within the particular case, setting or context. The staff members of the centres and family members who attend the centres were interviewed about their experiences with the services and the provision of
support. Additionally, staff members’ reflective records and participant observations were conducted for triangulation of data. Twenty eight families who utilised the centres participated in the study, as did three early childhood education teachers from each kindergarten and six child care workers from the child care centre.

With regards to family-staff relationships, the staff at the three centres indicated that building relationships with the families who utilised their centres was vital and all indicated that supporting families was a part of their job. The staff members described taking an interest in the family members’ lives and endeavouring to alleviate parents’ stress by making the transitions between the home and centre and the centre and home run smoothly. The staff members also described parent education programs that all the centres had implemented. All of the staff members expressed that the planned education programs were unsuccessful and that they felt that parents preferred to gain parenting information in a more informal context (Duncan, et al., 2006).

The staff members also expressed that they felt that there were barriers that limited the amount of time that they could spend supporting families. The staff from both the kindergartens and the child care centre expressed that the amount of paperwork that they needed to complete often meant that they were unable to interact with the parents for as long as they would like. The staff at the child care centre in particular stated that they would like to offer more regular social evenings at the centre but that they didn’t have the time or resources to do so (Duncan, et al., 2006).

The parents who were interviewed generally expressed that the centres provided opportunities for parents to interact with other families, however only a few of the parents said that they had the time to spend extra time developing relationships with other families at the centres at drop-off and pick-up times. This lack of interaction between families was particularly evident in the child care centre setting. However, many of the parents said that
they enjoyed social events and activities organised through the centres and stated that they used these events to share information and concerns with the centre staff. Some parents also expressed that these events had helped them form relationships with the centre staff and that they felt supported in these relationships (Duncan, et al., 2006).

As can be seen, the data obtained from the case studies was detailed and from these cases, Duncan, et al. (2006), were able to gain a rich description of how early childhood centre workers in New Zealand can provide support to families and key dimensions for how parents feel about the support that they receive. Considering the study provided such rich information, clearly it would be interesting to conduct similar case study research in other contexts such as Australia in order to examine the role that childcare workers play in providing family support within the Australian childcare context, as there may be differences in the way that childcare is delivered between the two countries.

Conclusion

The family environment has been found to play an important role in the development of children and the experience of stress in this environment has been related to negative child outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). While many parents feel stressed at times with the responsibilities of parenting, there are many issues that families face that can contribute or add to this stress. For example, suffering from mental illness, experiencing familial violence, experiencing relationship conflict or separation and experiencing conflict between work and family roles have all been associated with increased stress in families (Alexander & Baxter, 2005; Sternberg, et al., 1993; Webster-Stratton, 1990; Zubrick, et al., 2008). The experience of stress can have an effect on children’s outcomes as stress has been found to affect parenting styles, inhibit the formation of secure attachments, increase the incidence of child maltreatment and affect neural development in children (Cynader, 1994; Holden & Banez, 1996; McCain, et al., 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; van Ijzendoorn, Goldberg,
Kroonenberg & Frenkel, 1992; Webster-Stratton, 1990). However, there are factors that can buffer families from the experience of stress and its harmful outcomes, such as social support (Healy & Darlington, 1999; Zubrick, et al., 2008). While social support can act as a buffer for families experiencing stress, many people are isolated from such forms of support for a variety of reasons (Healy & Darlington, 1999).

Family support delivered through family support programs or through existing services such as child care centres can help these families who are stressed and may be isolated from social supports (Healy & Darlington, 1999; Thompson & Uyeda, 2004). The literature regarding family support however, has tended to focus solely on family support programs and little attention has been paid to the role that childcare workers play in providing support to families as a part of their service outside the landmark study of Duncan, et al. (2006). Due to this, more research is needed to examine the role that child care workers play in providing support to Australian families and the key interactions between workers and families that can generate this support.
References


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Family Support Within a Childcare Centre: A Case Study

Rikki Maynard

Edith Cowan University
Abstract

This report presents the findings of a case study that sought to gather a description of the ways that child care workers provide family support by gaining direct personal insights from parents and child care workers. One on one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three staff members and three parents from a child care centre in order to gain personal insights about the way that family support was delivered within the case. Additionally, the researcher recorded observations about the way that family support was being delivered within the centre, for triangulation of data. The analysis uncovered three aspects of support that were deemed to be important within the case. These included building positive relationships between parents and staff, encouraging parent involvement in the centre and providing formal and informal education to parents. Additionally, the participants felt that through these support mechanisms and also through providing parents with respite in times of need, the child care staff were reducing parents’ stress.

Key words: family support, child care, parent stress, family functioning

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Submitted October, 2008
Family Support within a Child Care Centre: A Case Study

The role that early life environments play in shaping our development has been a topic of interest amongst developmental researchers for some time (Power & Hertzman, 1997). In particular, researchers have paid considerable attention to the effect of the family environment on a child’s development, with research consistently linking poor family environments to poor child developmental outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). While it is widely recognised that being exposed to negative family environments can have damaging effects on a child’s development, it is apparent that many parents struggle at times with the normal pressures of parenting and providing supportive family environments (Thompson & Uyeda, 2004). In addition to this, many parents experience added strains or stressors that can have a debilitating effect on their ability to provide the types of high quality environments that facilitate the healthy development of children (Thompson & Uyeda, 2004).

Families in which a parent suffers from a mental illness, families experiencing familial violence and families whose relationships are marked by conflict or separation have been found to be marked by more stress than families who do not experience these same pressures (Sternberg, et al., 1993; Webster- Stratton, 1990; Zubrick, et al., 2008). Additionally, many Australian parents are currently experiencing stress due to difficulties combining their work and family responsibilities (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2006). The impact of stress in the family environment has been extensively researched and there is evidence that such stress can have pervasive effects on children’s development, both directly and also indirectly through its effect on parenting practices.

The experience of being reared in a stressful environment has been linked to impaired neural development in infants, with such infants’ nervous systems becoming wired to be overly responsive to stressful situations (Cynader, 1994; McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Furthermore, parental stress has been linked with increased rates
of insecure attachment formations between parents and their children (van Ijzendoorn, Goldberg, Kroonenberg & Frenkel, 1992). This issue is of importance as researchers have linked insecure attachments in infancy to deficits in children’s emotional development that impact on relationship behaviours in later life (Simpson, Collins, Tran & Haydon, 2007).

Parental stress has also been linked to the occurrence of child maltreatment. Caregivers who are experiencing stress are found to be more likely to be involved in the physical abuse of a child in their care (Holden & Banez, 1996). This link between carer stress and potential child maltreatment is of deep concern. The experience of being abused as a child has been linked to an increased rate of mood disorders, substance abuse, aggressive behaviour and difficulties in relationships in later life (Maughan & McCarthy, 1997).

While this evidence linking familial stress and poor developmental outcomes for children suggests a bleak future for families who are experiencing strains, there are factors that can buffer families from the experience of stress and its harmful outcomes. Social support provided by families, friends and community members, provided as both practical and emotional support, has been shown to reduce stress in some parents who are experiencing strains (Healy & Darlington, 1999; Zubrick, Smith, Nicholson, Sanson & Jackiewicz, 2008). However, many Australian parents are currently not accessing or receiving adequate social support (Zubrick, et al., 2008). People are increasingly isolated from such forms of support for a variety of reasons, for example migration can reduce the availability of family members and friends as providers of such support (Baldock, 2003). Additionally, communities tend to be more disjointed and people feel less connected to their community than in the past (Powell, 1997). The family support movement arose in this context as a means of assisting families who are experiencing stress and are isolated from social support networks (Roditti, 1995). While family support is traditionally described as specific programs delivered to families in need, it is also an approach that is utilised by many agencies working with
families, such as child care centres, schools and health services in order to strengthen and uphold family functioning (Healy & Darlington, 1999; Thompson & Uyeda, 2004). The family support approach is characterised by a set of goals or principles that guide the way support should be delivered to families. The approach is also characterised by a dedication to the process of empowerment, working in an ecological manner and recognition that all families need supports (Miller, Replogle & Weiss, 1995; Thompson & Uyeda, 2004). It aims to build relationships with families that reflect partnership, respect and equality, focus on families’ existing strengths to reinforce family functioning and promote respect for diversity (Miller, et al., 1995; Mulroney, 1998; Roditti, 1995; Thompson & Uyeda, 2004).

Research that has examined family support has tended to be focused on specific family support programs, with a large body of literature describing such programs and their effectiveness (Thompson & Uyeda, 2004). However, very little attention has been paid to understanding the ways that organisations working with families, such as child care centres, utilise the family support approach in the delivery of their service (Duncan, Bowden & Smith, 2006). Such research is needed given the increased use of child care and the opportunities this provides for family support to occur.

The number of children attending childcare in Australia has risen dramatically in recent years from 577,500 in 1994 to 752,800 in 2004 (Department of Family and Community Services, 2005). When families use child care services, family members usually attend the centre regularly. This regular contact gives child care workers and family members opportunities to build relationships with one another that could foster the delivery of support (Roditti, 1995). With large numbers of families placing their children in child care centres, these services are an invaluable resource for reaching families in need of support (Healy & Darlington, 199; Roditti, 1995). Due to this, the role that child care workers can play in
providing support to families becomes an essential point of focus and it is the topic of this study.

While there is little research regarding the role that child care workers play in providing support to families, there exists a set of principles in the National Childcare Accreditation Council’s guidelines dedicated to quality practices that are related to the family support approach. These principles include building relationships with families through the encouragement of parent participation in the service, fostering effective communication with families and respecting the diverse backgrounds of children who attend such services (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2006). Furthermore, others have argued on top of this that childcare workers can provide family support by teaching families about child development and parent-child relationships and by providing parents with space from their children when they are stressed (Roditti, 1995). Despite these claims, to date, research is only suggestive of the ways that family support can be delivered by child care workers. There is a need for research to be conducted within centres that are achieving family support in order to gain a rich description of the ways that this support is actually being delivered.

One key study has been reported in the literature by Duncan, et al. (2006). This study utilised case studies in order to examine three early childhood centres in New Zealand, two of which were kindergartens and one was a child care centre. Three staff members from each of the centres and 28 families who utilise their services were interviewed in order to gain information about their experiences with the service and the provision of support. Additionally, staff members’ reflective records and participant observations were conducted for triangulation of data. From the study, Duncan, et al., (2006) reported that three different areas of support were seen to be important. These were building trusting relationships between the staff and families, providing planned parenting programs for families and encouraging parent participation in the centre.
According to Duncan, et al., (2006), all the staff members indicated that building strong relationships with families was the critical aspect of their job and that they built these relationships by taking an interest in family members’ lives. From their observations, Duncan, et al., (2006) noted that the interactions between staff and families were informal and friendly in nature and that this facilitated the development of trusting relationships. With regards to parent education, staff members felt these programs were unsuccessful and that parents would prefer to gain information in a more informal context. In regard to parent involvement in the centre, the researchers reported that the centres all provided social activities for families, however it was noted that the families using the child care centre did not spend much time at the centre and tended to be less involved than those using the kindergartens.

As can be seen, Duncan, et al., (2006) have begun a rich description of the delivery of family support within these early childhood centres. However, there were aspects of the family support approach that were not discussed in this study. It did not show whether the staff members and families felt that the provision of support had an effect on decreasing the stress that some families face. This is the critical link that provides the rationale for family support and it needs to be identified. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct further research to determine which aspects of the family support approach are beneficial for facilitating the support of families in child care contexts and how they can be implemented in practice. Furthermore, it would be interesting to identify this link and to extend the study of Duncan, et al (2006) in a different context, such as Australia, as there may be differences in the way that child care is delivered between New Zealand and Australia, which could impact on the way that support is delivered in the child care setting.

The present study sought to gather a description of the ways that child care workers provide family support within an Australian child care centre by gaining direct personal
insights from parents and child care workers regarding the delivery of support. Specifically it
aimed to report on the questions: How do staff members at a child care centre provide family
support? Which aspects of the family support approach are beneficial for facilitating the
support of families in the child care centre? And do staff members’ and parents’ feelings
about family support differ?

Methodology

Research Design

Research based on a Constructivist/Interpretive world view focuses on understanding
the meaning of human experience through obtaining descriptions of these experiences and
their meanings from those people who have experienced them (Fossey, et al., 2000). This
paradigm was determined to be appropriate to guide the present study due to the study’s aim
of gaining a description of the way that family support is provided by child care workers
directly from the point of view of both child care workers who provide this support and also
families who receive this support. Due to the fundamentally descriptive nature of the research
question, it was determined that qualitative research would best facilitate the collection of
descriptive data (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). Specifically, a case study
method was chosen in order to explore the phenomena of family support through one child
care setting.

Case study research involves the exploration of an issue or phenomena through one or
more settings or contexts, in order to develop an understanding of the phenomena as it is
occurring within selected cases (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano & Morales, 2007; Saracho,
2008; Stake, 1995; Stevenson, 2004; Yin, 2003). The present study utilised a single-
instrument case study design, in which one bounded case is selected and used to examine a
phenomenon of interest (Creswell, et al., 2007). As this type of research typically utilises
multiple data collection methods, such as interviews and observations in order to obtain rich, in-depth descriptions of an issue as it is occurring in a case, multiple methods were utilised in the present study (Creswell, et al., 2007; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). One on one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff members and parents from the case in order to gain personal insights about the way that family support was delivered within the case. Additionally, I recorded my observations about the way that family support was being delivered within the centre, for triangulation of data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Finally, I recorded my reflections on the interpretation of data in a reflective journal to provide an audit trail.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of qualitative research underpinned by a Constructivist/Interpretive paradigm is determined by the study’s transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Transferability refers to whether the findings of a study can be transferred to other populations or situations (Shenton, 2004). Generally, transferability is not applicable to case study research as the data obtained are specific to the context that was studied (Creswell, et al., 2007). Credibility refers to whether the findings accurately reflect the reality of the phenomena being studied (Shenton, 2004). The triangulation of data sources is a technique often used by researchers to enhance credibility and it was utilised in the present study by employing both interviews and researcher observations for data collection (Shenton, 2004; Yeh & Inman, 2007). Dependability refers to whether repetition of a study under the same conditions would result in the same findings and is addressed by describing the way the research was conducted in detail (Shenton, 2004). The following section on the conduct of research has been included to address this. Confirmability refers to the notion that due to the nature of qualitative research, objectivity is unattainable, however by keeping an audit trail, accountability can be achieved (Morrow, 2005). For this
reason I kept an audit trail (Appendix A), detailing my thoughts and reflections on the data
collection and analysis process that could be examined by my supervisors.

Site/Participants

As cases in case study research are chosen for their capacity to provide an insight into
the issue of interest, it was determined that the case would need to be a child care centre that
claims to provide family support as a part of its service (Creswell, et al., 2007). An authority
in child care research was consulted to identify appropriate centres which make this claim,
for the case study. The child care centre that was selected for the case study is a community
based centre located in the Perth metropolitan area, in a suburb of low socioeconomic status.
In addition to providing long day care to families; the centre aims to provide one to one
support to parents who attend the centre. The coordinator of this centre was approached and
provided with information regarding the study. After expressing interest in the centre being
used for the case study, the coordinator was provided with information letters (Appendix B)
detailing conditions of participating to pass on to all of the staff members and parents who
utilise the service, in order to recruit participants. After being provided with the information
letters, six people from the case expressed interest in the study and participated in the
interviews, three of whom were staff members and three were parents who utilise the centre.
All of the participants were female and the ages of the participants' varied.

Materials

An information letter outlining the design and scope of the research (Appendix B)
was provided to potential participants. A consent form (Appendix C) was given to
participants to sign prior to the interview in order to obtain permission to commence and tape
record the interview. An interview schedule (Appendix D) was used by the researcher in
order to help direct or guide the progress of the interview. A tape-recorder was used to record
the interviews to ensure the content was preserved for transcription. A notebook and pen was
used by the researcher in order to record a reflective journal of their thoughts and observations during the interview process. A list of counselling and family services (Appendix E) was compiled to be provided to participants if it appeared they were distressed or concerned on completion of the interviews.

Conduct of the Research

Before recruitment of the sample was conducted, approval from Edith Cowan University's Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Ethics Committee was sought. Once approval was granted and the participants had been recruited, the researcher negotiated with each participant to decide upon a mutually convenient time and location for the interviews to take place. Each interview was conducted within an office at the child care centre. The researcher spent time at the centre prior to the interviews and for a short time after for general observation to take place.

Before the interviews commenced, the participants were given the opportunity to discuss the study with the researcher and were instructed to read and sign the consent form (Appendix C) if they agreed to participate in the study. The researcher used an interview schedule (Appendix D) to help guide the progress of the interview, however the interviews were conducted in a relaxed, conversational manner and the participants were encouraged to discuss any information that they felt was important to the topic of family support. The interview schedule was developed based on the literature regarding family support. After completion of each interview, the participants were thanked for their contribution to the study. Once the interviews were completed and I had left the centre, I recorded my observations of the centre and my thoughts on the data collection in the reflective journal. The data from the interviews was then transcribed and the tape recordings were destroyed.

All data was collected during August and September of 2008.

Ethics
It was anticipated that the interview process would not cause distress to any of the participants, as the topic of study was not expected to be sensitive for participants. However, the researcher compiled a list of relevant counselling or support services’ contact details (Appendix E) to be provided to any participants who appeared distressed or concerned, to encourage them to seek help for any issues that may have arisen in the interviews. Upon completion of the interviews, all of the participants appeared relaxed and untroubled.

Participants were asked to read and sign the consent form before commencement of the interviews and were advised that they could refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were also asked if they consented to being tape recorded prior to the commencement of the interviews and the tape recordings were destroyed once data had been transcribed. In addition, all names and identifiable information were omitted from the transcriptions.

Analysis

The data obtained in case studies are analysed by extracting and examining themes that arise in order to develop a description of the phenomena of interest as it occurs within the case (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, the analysis process involved comparative thematic analysis as outlined by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) and Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005). This analysis technique was chosen as it allowed me to capture specific themes and gain an overall description of how family support has been occurring in the case (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Once the interviews had been recorded, I listened to the tapes and transcribed the data with all identifying information being omitted. The transcribed interview data and my reflections were presented within a triple column display, including a column for the data, a column for my notes and column for analysis.

The next step in the data analysis involved coding the data and then collating the data that was coded in the same way. The coding process involved assigning descriptive labels to
the pieces of text that reflect the participant's meanings, feelings and actions (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). The codes used in this process were derived from the literature regarding family support and family support within child care centres. For example, when participants described the relationships between the parents and staff positively, the text that reflected these feelings was coded as "parent-caregiver relationships-positive". These coded pieces of text were then assembled to represent the various themes that emerged from the data. By analysing the data in this way, I was able to gather the themes that emerged from the case, in order to identify the descriptions of family support.

Using triangulation of data analysis methods is important in increasing the trustworthiness of qualitative analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Triangulation of data analysis was utilised in the present study by comparing the themes that emerged from the interviews, with my observations. This process also allowed me to determine whether the staff members and parents felt differently about family support, as it was expected that parents and staff would provide diverse opinions on the support provided by child care workers.

The analysis process was continuous, with the researcher returning back to the data often to reassign codes, reorganise themes and compare participants' data, in order to ensure the final analysis adequately reflected the participants' descriptions and feelings about family support. The final stage of analysis showed four general themes, which were labelled positive relationships between child care staff and parents, the encouragement of parent involvement in the centre, parent education and stress reduction as a product the support provided. The comparative analysis showed that parent and staff participants' ideas about support converged and my observations also provided data that was congruent with the data that emerged from the interviews. The themes that emerged from the interview and observation
Findings and Interpretations

Positive Relationships Between Child Care Staff and Parents

Overall, both sets of participants felt strongly that positive relationships were the important aspect of family support within the centre. The quality of the relationships that are built in the centre was described positively by both the staff members and the parents and the provision of support through these relationships was highlighted by both sets of participants.

I would say that it’s not so much a business relationship. It’s like a friend... it’s so important for them to see me as a friend and someone they can talk to. Especially in the centre, we really try and help them. It’s very open door you know the parents can come to me and talk to me about anything... It’s a very personal relationship. (Staff Member)

The friendship aspect of these relationships was highlighted by the staff members. While they described building these relationships as an essential part of their job, each described the relationships as being based on a meaningful friendship rather than work-related relationships. For example, staff members felt that it was the provision of emotional support to parents which constituted the central aspect of these friendships. Staff members described providing this support through “taking an interest in the parents’ lives”, listening to concerns that parents have, talking to them about their concerns and providing reassurance.

We have very trusting relationships and we often feel that there is a family sort of environment. It’s a very family orientated organisation. (Parent)

The parent participants reciprocated this idea, highlighting the friendship aspects of these relationships as well. For them trust was a central aspect of these friendships. The parents felt that they could trust the caregivers and that this trust facilitated their ability to receive support from the caregivers and talk to them about their concerns.

The relationships are very good... I’ve had a few issues with one of my sons, and yeah the support from the staff was just overwhelming. With how much they’d say everything is ok and it’s normal and they provided books for me to
read and things like that... But yeah there was a lot of discussion and you
know working out what we could do at home as well as here, so there was lots
of support that way. (Parent)

As evident above, the parents also defined the support aspect of these friendships, and
described receiving both emotional and practical support from the staff through these
relationships. The parent participants described the provision of emotional support in similar
ways to the staff members, with discussion of concerns and reassurance being highlighted by
the parents. The parents felt that it was this reassurance, that allowed them to be comfortable
in their friendships with the staff and that this reassurance raised their confidence in their
parenting abilities. Practical support was described in terms of partnerships with staff, such as
working together to develop strategies to overcome difficulties. This again provided parents
with reassurance in their parenting abilities.

I noticed how a staff member talked to each parent as they left that day. In one
incidence, the staff member asked after the health of one of the parents and
said that they had heard they had been unwell. The parent stopped to discuss
this with the staff member who expressed their sympathy towards the parent.
It seemed that the staff member was very caring and sensitive toward the
parent and the parent appeared comfortable to be talking to the staff member
throughout this exchange. (Researcher’s Observation)

The participants’ descriptions of the relationships and the support that is provided
through them were graphically supported by my observations. When observing exchanges
between the parents and staff members, it appeared to me that the parents and staff had strong
friendships and that support is provided to parents through these relationships. I noticed that
the parents appeared comfortable talking about issues they were having with the staff
members, which supports the parents’ descriptions of the relationships as being built on trust.
I also found that the staff members were very receptive to the parents, talking to them about
their concerns and providing the parents with sympathy and reassurance. The friendships
aspect of these relationships was also reflected in my observations, in that the parent’s and
staff not only discussed concerns, but also joked and laughed with one another, evidencing a
good rapport and comfortable interaction.

These findings support the findings of Duncan et al., (2006) who stated that staff
members in their study indicated that building strong relationships with families was an
important aspect of family support in their cases. Duncan, et al., (2006) stressed that the
relationships between staff and families were based on friendship and that this facilitated the
development of trusting relationships. Additionally, these findings link well with the
principle of building relationships with families in the National Childcare Accreditation
Council’s guidelines for quality practice (2006), which suggests that building these
relationships is an important aspect of quality child care practice.

Encouragement of Parent Involvement

Encouraging parents to be involved in the centre also emerged as being important in
facilitating the delivery support to families within this centre. The participants felt that
parents were encouraged to be involved in the centre and that parents felt welcome to spend
time in the centre day to day. The participants were highly cognisant of this and described
different ways that parents are encouraged to be involved, from encouraging their direct
involvement in the programming and running of the centre to organising special events for
families to attend the centre.

A lot of parents work so it’s quite difficult for them to spend a lot of time with
their children in the centre. We have mother’s day morning teas and father’s
day morning teas and various activities that parents can come to and there is
always a big turn up at Christmas parties, which is really good. (Staff
Member)

The staff members felt that it was important for parents to be involved in the centre, in
order to build relationships through which support can be delivered and so that the parents
would feel comfortable with quality of care that their children were receiving. While they
believed that parents felt welcome to spend time at the centre day to day, they also felt it was
important to organise special events for families to attend in order to encourage parents to
come to the centre who may not have time on a regular basis. Staff members also felt that it
was important for parents to be involved in the planning and programming in the centre,
again so that the parents would feel comfortable with quality of care that their children were
receiving. For example one participant stated, “The parents aren’t going to feel much stress
because they know their children are in a safe environment and their children are being cared
for really really well”.

We have a reference group here so we are invited to come and be in the
reference group to discuss policies and procedures in the centre. You know
about the service, which is excellent and every day running as well, they ask
question like what concerns you might have. (Parent)

The parents also highlighted their involvement in programming and planning in the
centre and felt that this helped them feel comfortable with the care their children were
receiving in the centre. This involvement also led them to feel that there was an atmosphere
of family friendliness and that they were an important part of the centre. This atmosphere
helped the parent participants to feel comfortable spending time in the centre and they stated
that they often spend time in the centre when they bring their children in. The parents
suggested that by being encouraged to be involved in the centre, they became comfortable
with the staff members and they had opportunities to build relationships with staff.

The centre seems very welcoming for parents and the parents seemed very
comfortable in the centre and with the staff. I noticed that parents are invited
to spend time in the centre when dropping their children off and that they are
encouraged to help themselves to tea or coffee from a kitchen area. I also
noticed that a parent that was spending time in the centre playing with their
child. (Researcher’s Observation)

My observations supported the participants’ descriptions of how parents are
encouraged to be involved in the centre. They also supported the notion that parents feel
comfortable being in the centre. During the time parents spent in the centre, I noticed that
they talked to staff members about their concerns or spent time with their children. The
interactions between staff and parents that I observed, took place when parents were taking their children to the centre and I noticed how family support was facilitated through encouraging parents to spend time at the centre on a day to day basis.

Critically however, these findings are dissimilar to those of Duncan, et al., (2006), who reported that although the centres all provided social activities for families, the families that used the child care centre did not spend much time at the centre day to day. Therefore, it appears that in the present case, the strategies used to encourage parents to be involved in the centre had also created an environment in which parents feel comfortable engaging in, thus facilitating the delivery of support to these parents. The present study’s findings regarding encouraging parent involvement are in line with a principle in the National Childcare Accreditation Council’s guidelines for quality practice, namely building relationships through the encouragement of parent participation in the service (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2006). This suggests that this strategy is important in building relationships, through which support can be delivered, within a child care context.

Parent Education

The participants all felt strongly that parent education provided by child care staff was an important facet of family support within this case. It was stated by participants that parenting can be difficult and that the parenting information provided by the child care workers was helpful and could reduce stress regarding parenting. Participants described formal education workshops and also informal education (casual information exchanges) as being provided for families at the centre.

I think it’s fantastic and we often provide a lot of training for them...You’re suddenly sent home from the hospital and it’s like ‘off you go don’t kill the child.’ So it’s quite overwhelming and people need a lot of support and I think it’s really good that child care workers offer that support and there is no judgement involved in it. You don’t treat them like they’re a bad parent or anything. I think it’s a really positive thing. (Staff Member)
All of the staff members described these planned workshops and the informal education they provide parents with as being important forms of support that they deliver to parents. The support provided through this education was described in terms of both practical and emotional support. Through teaching parents about parenting strategies in a broad range of topics, the staff members feel they are providing practical support. However, the staff members highlighted the role that education can play in the delivery of emotional support. The staff members described their views on the demands of parenting, suggesting it can be overwhelming and they felt that through assisting parents to build on their parenting skills, they were helping parents feel comfortable and confident in their abilities as a parent, which would then enhance family functioning.

You know there are a lot of parents that need some help. And it’s not as if it is forced on them. There are parenting programs that are offered, especially for when the children are having behavioural issues and that sort of thing. And being a parent doesn’t come with a handbook. You need some help sometimes. (Parent)

In convergence with the staff members’ beliefs about parenting and education, the parents all felt that parenting can be overwhelming at times and that the planned education workshops that are offered by the staff can help parents who are experiencing difficulties with parenting to feel more confident in their abilities.

If they don’t know something themselves, they’ll go and research for you. But mainly like I speak to (staff member) and they will let the staff members know or give me information. And yeah if they’re not sure they’re happy to find out for you. It’s quite informal and it’s relaxing. (Parent)

The parents also described that an informal approach helps when being provided with education. When discussing this form of parent education, the parents highlighted the relaxed and friendly nature of the information exchanges. The parents also described feeling a sense of relief or reassurance as a result of these informal exchanges of parenting information, “It gives you peace of mind that you know someone is going to get you an answer.”
Again, these findings also differ from those obtained by Duncan, et al., (2006). In their study it was reported that staff members found planned parent education workshops to be unsuccessful, with few parents attending, and that they felt parents would prefer to gain information in a more informal context. While parent participants in the present study stated that they gained information in an informal context, they also stated that they had attended workshops at the centre and that they found these to be beneficial in easing their concerns and increasing their confidence in their parenting abilities, thus reducing any parenting related stress. These findings clearly show that both formal education workshops and informal information exchanges are important aspects of family support within this centre. It has been speculated in the literature that parent education provided by child care workers is one important aspect of family support and these findings support this (Roditti, 1995).

Reduction of Stress

All of the participants felt that child care centre staff play an important role in reducing families’ stress by providing them with emotional and practical support, through the friendships that are built, the parent involvement in the centre and the education that is provided. In addition to the previously discussed aspects of support, the participants’ felt that parents’ stress can be reduced through providing parents with respite from their parenting role when they are stressed.

We support a lot of our parents out of care hours as well in dealing with stress and just trying to make parenting and child care and everything as enjoyable as possible. (Staff Member)

The staff member participants felt that aiming to reduce parents stress was an extremely important part of their job and that they endeavour to make parenting less stressful and more enjoyable. The staff members felt that through the emotional and practical support they provide parents, they were reducing the stress that many families experience. For example, the staff felt that the reassurance that is delivered through the friendships between
staff and parents could help parents feel confident in their abilities, thus reducing stress related to parenting. The staff members also felt that by providing parents with this support at any time, not only when their children are at the centre, they could really make an impact on the wellbeing of families.

Parents come in and say I really need a break and that’s why we do make spaces for those parents. We’re here to support them and we’re part of their support network. It’s really crucial that a good child care centre does take that into account. (Staff Member)

In addition to the emotional and practical support that is provided through their friendships with parents and parent education efforts, the staff members described making room in their programme to fit children in when their parents were experiencing strains. The staff members noted that parents need respite at times and that taking care of children when their parents are stressed can provide parents with some relief, which can enhance their family functioning.

I was so stressed bringing my son here... and they just put me at ease. And of course, dropping your child off for the first time is stressful and the staff will sit you down and you can have a coffee. And now I see some mums that walk in now and their kids get upset and cry and I go, I’ve been there its ok you know, so it’s just that reassurance. (Parent)

The parents also described feeling reductions in stress due to the support that is delivered by the child care workers in this centre. In convergence with the staff members, the parents also noted that the respite for parents who are experiencing stress that is provided by the centre is important. However, the parents highlighted the role of the emotional support provided by the staff, that is delivered through their friendships, in reducing their stress. The parents felt that this emotional support was important as it gave them reassurance and encouragement, thus reducing their stress. Given the extensive and pervasive effects of stress in the family environment on parenting practices and children’s development, these findings highlight the importance of incorporating these aspects of support within this case.
The importance of child care workers aiming to reduce stress in families by providing them with support was not discussed in the study by Duncan et al., (2006). Here, it has emerged as an important theme. The idea that emerged in the present study was that providing respite for parents can play a role in reducing their stress. This supports the speculation by Roditti (1995) that through simply providing a break for parents, child care workers can provide families with support. In addition, the fact that parents reported feeling less stress due to the emotional support that is provided by the staff shows the effectiveness of incorporating family support into the child care context.

Conclusions

These findings describe the strategies that facilitate the delivery of family support within this child care centre, specifically the roles of trusting, friendly relationships, encouraging parents’ involvement in the centre and providing formal and informal parent education. Through building trusting, friendly relationships between staff and parents, the participants believed that parents would feel comfortable turning to staff members for support in times of need. Through encouraging parents to be involved in the centre, the staff and parents felt that parents would feel comfortable spending time in the centre, thus aiding the delivery of support. Through providing formal and informal education to parents, the participants felt that parents would become more confident in their parenting abilities, thus reducing parenting related stress and enhancing their family functioning. Additionally, the staff and parents felt that through these support mechanisms and also through providing parents with respite in times of need, the child care staff were reducing parents’ stress. These findings suggest the effectiveness of incorporating family support within this centre. The implications of these findings are of great importance, given the demonstrated effects of familial stress on children’s development (Thompson & Uyeda, 2004).
The present study has some possible limitations, which could have had an effect on the data that was produced. The interactions between staff and parents that I observed may not have been indicative of the interactions that occur on a daily basis due to the effect of having a researcher present. However, due to the apparent comfort of both the staff members and parents in these interactions, it appeared as though my presence had little effect on the behaviour shown and that these interactions were characteristic of the staff and parents. Additionally, as it is a policy of the centre to provide support to families, the staff members and parents may not have been objective in their descriptions of support and may have overstated the support that is provided and their beliefs about its effects. Due to the convergence between the parent and staff members’ responses and my observations however, it appears as though this had little effect and that the data produced accurately reflected the family support that is provided in the centre.

As was stated earlier, findings from case study research cannot be generalised to other cases (Creswell, et al., 2007). Therefore, the strong presence of family support within this case may not be present in other child care centres. Additionally, the strategies utilised to facilitate support in this case may not be characteristic of the delivery of support in other centres. However, these findings do give a strong foundation for which aspects of the family support approach can be beneficial for facilitating the support of families in child care contexts and how they can be implemented in practice. To extend on these findings, it would be pertinent for similar research to be conducted on a larger scale, encompassing more child care centres and more participants in order to gain a larger picture of how family support is delivered by child care workers. It would be valuable for such research to compare the existence of family support and its delivery across centres that vary in location, those that are privately run and those that are community based and those that claim to provide family support as a part of their service and those who do not include family support as a part of...
their vision. This would enable researchers to gain a broader understanding of the mechanisms of family support that are effective in enhancing the functioning of families, within a range of child care contexts.
References


February
I met with Andrew and Margaret to discuss the research project and decided the study will be on how child care workers deliver family support. I also began researching family support in general and the ways in which it can be delivered within a child care context.

March
As I want to find out about family support from both child care workers and staff, we decided a case study would be appropriate. I continued researching the literature regarding family support and also case study methodology and began writing up my research proposal for submission on the 28th of March. I decided that I would conduct both interviews and observations to get a description of how family support is occurring within one child centre. I also developed the questions for my interview schedule based on the literature I have read about both family support and child care.

April
I attended the Scientific Review Meeting with Andrew, Margaret and Justine and we decided I needed to make a few changes to the proposal. I made these changes and then submitted the proposal for ethical approval to the Ethics Committee. An issue regarding the clarity of my research method, case study, was also raised so I decided to focus on building up my description of the method for research report. I also continued reviewing the literature.

May
I continued reviewing the literature. I have found that there are few articles regarding family support within a child care context but these are not based on actual research. They are more opinion pieces and are speculative of the way in which support can be provided in a child care context. I also began writing a literature review based on my topic of study.

June
I continued reviewing the literature and writing the literature review. I have found a study by Duncan, et al. (2006) that examined how family support was delivered within a child care context that is really interesting. The study was conducted in New Zealand so the results may vary to what I might find in my study as there may be differences in legislation and child care policy between the two countries. However, this study has given me a good idea of the areas of family support that may arise in my case. In particular, the authors found that building positive relationships between staff and parents was important in support in their cases and that formal parent education workshops are not very successful in supporting parents. Reading this article has been a turning point for me in that I now have more of a basis for my study; I know what aspects of support are important in their cases and I can compare this to my case.

July
I continued reviewing the literature, writing the literature review and I also began writing the introduction and methodology of the research report.

August
6/8/08: I met with coordinator of a potential site. The coordinator seemed very interested in the study taking place within the centre. I gave the coordinator copies of the information letter to hand out to parents and staff in order to recruit participants. I will need to get a working with children check before conducting interviews at the centre.

The centre manager showed me around the centre and introduced me to staff members, to see if any were interested in participating. The staff were all very friendly and many appeared interested in the project. While walking around the centre, I noticed a table set up with Aboriginal paintings and native plants. The centre manager then told me that as the community the centre is situated in is multicultural, they like to have representations of different cultures around the centre.

16/8/08: I got the working with children check today, so will be able to start interviews soon.

18/8/08: I spoke with the coordinator of the centre today. We organised a time for me to interview four people next week. She said that I may have trouble in recruiting parent participants as they have all just been interviewed for the centre's accreditation.

25/8/08: I conducted four interviews and spent some time observing at the centre today. The interviews went well. The participants all seemed to feel that family support is important in child care. There was a lot of discussion regarding the relationships between staff and parents. The participants all said that parent education programs are successful at the centre, which is surprising given the findings of Duncan, et al (2006).

Before the interviews commenced I spent some time casually observing the staff and parents in the centre. I noticed how a staff member talked to each parent as they left that day. In one incidence, the staff member asked after the health of one of the parents and said that they had heard they had been unwell. The parent stopped to discuss this with the staff member who expressed their sympathy towards the parent. It seemed that the staff member was very caring and sensitive toward the parent and the parent appeared comfortable to be talking to the staff member throughout this exchange. The centre appears very welcoming for parents and the parents seemed very comfortable in the centre and with the staff. I noticed that parents are invited to help themselves to tea or coffee from a kitchen area. I also noticed that a parent that was spending time in the centre playing with their child.

The participants tended to talk about their relationships as "friendships". From what I saw when I was observing interactions between staff and parents, it does appear that the relationships are built on friendship and trust. They don't just seem to talk to each other on a professional level; they laugh and joke around with each other too.

September

2/5/08: I conducted two more interviews at the centre. These went well again. The participants discussed similar aspects of support as in the previous interviews. I have found it quite surprising that parents and staff seem to have similar opinions on the aspects of family support that they are discussing, as I was expecting them to have some differences in their viewpoints.

I also managed to spend some time observing interactions between staff and parents today. I again noticed that the relationships a friendly in nature and the staff really seem to care about the parents lives. The parents seemed very comfortable to be talking to the staff members
about a variety of topics (e.g. in one case the conversation was light-hearted and in another the parent was discussing some concerns they had). When I arrived at the centre, I noticed a flyer on the door advertising an upcoming father’s day lunch at the centre. From the flyer, it appeared that the lunch was celebrating all male carers and that anyone was invited to attend (e.g. Mother’s and female carers were also invited). One of the staff members talked a lot about activities such as this that are planned in order to encourage parents to be more involved in the centre, so this may emerge as being important in this case.

3/5/08: I started analysing the data today. I wrote comments in one column (e.g. parent seemed to feel really strong on this point) and I assigned labels to pieces of the transcribed data (e.g. Parent-caregiver relationships positive, Parent-Education positive). I went over the transcriptions a few times to make sure I was capturing what the participants felt was important. I then collated the pieces of text that were coded the same into themes. The themes that emerged were labelled positive relationships between child care staff and parents, the encouragement of parent involvement in the centre, parent education, importance of effective communication and stress reduction as a product of using a quality child care service. I compared the themes that emerged from the parents’ interviews, the staff members’ interviews and my observations and they seem to converge quite well.

The theme of positive relationships is similar to that of Duncan, et al. (2006) in that the positive parent-staff relationships emerged as being important aspects of family support. I was expecting this to be an important aspect however there are some differences in the other themes. For example Duncan, et al., found that parents did not spend much time in the child care centre day to day, however that seems to be very important to the participants in this study. I also noticed a lot of parents spending time in the centre when I was there. They didn’t just drop off their kids and leave straight away; they stayed around and talked to the staff.

10/5/08: I decided to have another look at my analysis to make sure I was capturing important themes accurately. I think that while the participants did describe the importance of communicating effectively, they did not really link this with support- it was described more in the context of keeping up to date with how children were going in the centre. Due to this I think I may have to remove this as a theme. The other themes, however do still seem to be coming through as being important for support in this centre.

October

1/10/08: After receiving Andrew’s feedback on my report, I realise I need to look a bit deeper at the data and unpack the participants’ quotes a bit more. I need to start looking more at the effects of this support, to show how important it is.

6/10/08: I presented my findings at the Fourth Year Conference. After preparing and presenting my findings, I realise need to look at my themes more in terms of my research question- I need to link my findings more clearly to how family support is being delivered within the child care centre.
Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Rikki Maynard and I am a student studying Psychology Honours at Edith Cowan University. It is a requirement of the course that I undertake a research project. This project has been approved by the Edith Cowan University Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Ethics Committee.

The aim of the research is to discover the ways in which childcare workers deliver family support, from the point of view of both childcare workers and parents who use childcare services.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will meet with you in person to conduct an interview. It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately 30 to 40 minutes to complete. The interview will be tape-recorded and conducted in a relaxed, conversational style. I will be interested in anything you have to say regarding the topic and there are no right or wrong answers to this interview.

Information given throughout the interview will remain strictly confidential between my supervisors and myself, with any identifying information being omitted from my final research presentation. You will have the right to refuse to answer any questions and will be able to withdraw from the interview at any time. Once the data has been transcribed, the tape recording will be erased.

If you are considering participation in this study, please contact me via phone or email. We can then arrange a meeting time for the interview to take place.

If you have any questions and concerns, or you wish to discuss the study, please contact me on 0419 908 459 or email me at rmaynard@student.ecu.edu.au, or my supervisors; Dr Andrew Guilfoyle (6304 5395) and Associate Professor Margaret Sims (6304 5629). Alternatively, if you wish to speak to someone who is independent of the research project, please contact Dr Justine Dandy (6304 5105). Thank you for reading this information sheet and for showing interest in my research.

Rikki Maynard
Appendix C
Letter of Consent

Please read the following statements and sign the section marked below if you agree to participate in this study.

- I have read and understood the information sheet
- I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the project
- I understand that the interview will be tape-recorded and that the recording will be erased after transcription of the interview is complete
- I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the process at any stage
- I understand that I can refuse to answer any question and do not have to give a reason for my refusal
- I understand that any identifying information will be erased from the finished work, that I have a right to view the finished project and that the study may be published

Participant’s Signature ___________________________ Date ________________

Participant’s First Name ___________________________

Contact Number _________________________________

Researcher’s Signature ___________________________ Date ________________
Appendix D

Interview Schedule

I would like to thank you for your interest in this research and for your time. I am very interested to hear about your ideas regarding the ways in which childcare workers deliver family support and I am sure that anything you can tell me will be valuable.

1. I am interested to know about the relationships that childcare workers build with families. How would you describe the relationships between you and the childcare workers/parents at this centre?

2. I am also interested to know about the level of parent participation within this centre.
   For Parents-
   Do you feel that parent involvement is important in a child care centre?
   Do you feel that you are encouraged to be involved in the centre?
   - If yes, how do the childcare workers encourage your involvement?
   - Are you comfortable participating in activities that are run at the centre?
   - If no, what do you think the childcare workers could do to make you feel more comfortable being involved in the centre?
   For Childcare Workers-
   Do you feel that parent involvement is important in a child care centre?
   Would you say that parents are encouraged to participate in your centre?
   - If yes, can you describe what you do to encourage this?

3. Can you tell me about the communication between parents and childcare workers?
   Do you feel that the childcare workers communicate well with the parents that use the centre?
   How would you describe the communication that occurs?

4. Can you tell me how you would feel about childcare workers educating parents about children’s development and parent-child relationships?
   Do you think that this would be useful for parents?
   Do you think that it is within the role of being a childcare worker to do this?

5. Do you feel that using childcare centres can reduce the stress that some parents may face?
   If yes, in what ways do you think that parents stress is reduced?

6. I’m also interested in anything else that you might like to discuss regarding the ways that childcare workers support families. Is there anything else that you’d like to talk about in relation to this?
Appendix E
List of Counselling and Family Services

Centrecare 9325 6644
Child Care Access Hotline 1800 670 305
Child Health Centres (Government) 1300 135 030
Edith Cowan University Psychological Service Centre 3901 0011
Family Helpline 9223 1100
Lifeline 13 11 14
Mental Health Direct 1800 220 400
Ngala Family Resource Centre 9368 9368
Parenting Line 9272 1466
Playgroup WA 9288 8088
Relationships Australia 1300 364 277
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**Journal of Family Psychology**

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