

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE TASMANIAN
CHILD AND FAMILY CENTRES

Submission by Yvonne Young

16th March 2017

Introduction and Context

I have been a volunteer at Chigwell Child and Family Centre for about a year. For the last three months I have also been a member of the Advisory Board. My main observation, generally, is that CFCC works, in that it provides support to families and achieves its mission statement of providing a safe and caring place for children. I think families who use the centre are better placed to comment on the level of support they receive from the centre. Underlying my response to these terms of reference are three main themes.

1. What factors contribute to the success of the centre?
2. The consequences of the way it operates from a service delivery staffing point of view
3. Value Adding

All my observations and opinions are based on my experience engaging with children and families at CFCC on a weekly basis.

Terms of reference

The challenges to and benefits of the provision of an integrated collaborative health and well-being and early education and care service delivery model.

Benefits: The collaborative health and well-being and early education and care service model makes so much sense and works well. Combining services increases the chances of reaching families that other services don't reach. For example, families may visit the centre to access the Foodbank, but their children run in to play, don't want to leave and start to interact with staff and volunteers. They return, and gradually a relationship of trust develops and they start to disclose issues they are struggling with. Then, they can be very gently and informally encouraged to seek support from other services.

It helps so much when service providers come in to the centre. For example, a representative from Baptcare visits the centre weekly. She spends all her time on the floor and interacts naturally with the children and families. I can think of about eight instances when I have introduced her directly to families and it has resulted in them engaging with another service, and consequently, receiving more support.

I believe that the centre is playing an important role in preventing social isolation. Often families are isolated socially and they find that coming to the centre really helps. They often make friends with other families. I have met many families who have just moved to Hobart from interstate. The centre is not weather dependent or cost dependent, so they can just drop in when they feel like it and can connect with other people. The centre is a lovely space for children to play in, and although parents still have duty of care, they can relax and have adult conversations.

I have met several grandparents who can also feel isolated and overwhelmed when they are looking after children all day. Last week I recognised a 4 year old but not the adults with her. I had seen her with her Mum. I had also seen her with one set of grandparents. Last week she was with the other set of grandparents. So that little girl is has access to a continuity in play space although her carers are changing.

I have only met one foster parent at the centre. I think it would be good to encourage foster parents to visit. I believe they would benefit from its supportive environment. Also, children

who are in state care and experiencing changes can come to the centre to play and build relationships with staff and volunteers. In that situation, the centre can provide a degree of continuity.

I believe that the centre is very successful in supporting people who are struggling with anxiety and depression. We are particularly well placed to identify and support post natal depression. The nurses do a post-natal 6 week questionnaire designed to alert them to any signs of post-natal depression. I have spoken to several mums whom I have felt concerned about; they come from a distant suburb and don't use our nurse. I asked one of our nurses what helps them identify PND when just speaking to mums. She said that often they keep on saying, "I should be doing this and I should be doing that. ' That simple tool helped me identify four mothers with PND who then received appropriate support and management. In another two cases it was the fathers who were expressing concern. I alerted the nurses of my concern and in their on-floor time they talked to the mums.

The implication of this from a service delivery point of view is that our nurses need to have on floor time built into their diary. Their case load has to be smaller than it would normally be. They need to have room to manoeuvre so that they can respond flexibly. For example, one dad, who had just turned up with his baby for the first time and was clearly in distress, spoke to the nurse for an hour in her lunch break. The nurses at the centre are a vital part of the collaborative model and their presence on the floor and in their office needs to be maintained and possibly increased.

One area where I have felt that we could perform better is domestic violence. There have been countless situations like that: at the centre we respond very effectively, often outwith our area of responsibility. We are sometimes limited and frustrated, because of the difficulty in women accessing the services they need. For example, I was just shopping in the city when I recognised a mum from the centre sitting crying and with her toddler who was also crying. She told me that she had just been to the police to report a violation of her ex-partner's restraining order, but her toddler was crying loudly. The policewomen said it would be better to come back when her toddler was settled. I returned with her to mind her toddler and the policewomen involved were empathetic and efficient. It made me think that policemen should be coming into the centre on an on-call basis as the need arises. In that way the under five children can be looked after in adjunct care while the necessary paperwork is being done.

In fact, increased linkages with many services seems important. When staff come in, they need to fit into the friendly, relaxed non-judgmental culture of the centre. Having a cup of tea and a chat with somebody or playing with a child needs to be regarded as work. To a large extent, the success of the centre is dependent on the quality of the staff and volunteers. Even one team member who is inflexible or judgmental compromises the families' willingness to engage with the centre. During the last year a counsellor began at the centre. She spent time on the floor and sat and talked to families as well as providing formal appointment times to access. This has been a huge success and has added to the value of the centre.

I feel that the way we work puts staff at risk of burn out. In considering budgets, resources and operational planning,, this needs to be taken into account.

The role of Child and Family Centres in providing early learning to children.

The role of Child and Family Centres in providing education and support to families and carers in their parenting role and participation in early learning programs.

At CFCC children can access a safe space to play and learn. Over the last year, there has been an improvement in the quality of the activities provided. The appointment of an educator has meant that we now have a more organised and effective learning space.

One of the challenges of CFCs is that because they cater for ages 0 to 5 years; children accessing the centre are at different developmental ages. In child care centres, children are usually grouped chronologically rather than by family grouping because of the difficulty of providing activities for the different stages in the same space.

Our educator has succeeded in doing this in the general space as well as providing directed activities for 3 to 5 year olds. This means that when, for example, a family with a baby and a three year old comes in, the carer can sit on a couch and interact with both children in the same space. Also there are a variety of activities designed to improve skills, including fine motor and gross motor. There are always imaginative and creative play opportunities.

We do have some families who come most days and the educator works hard at varying activities to maintain the enthusiasm of the children. The educator also provides positive modelling for carers in talking to children and playing with them. One of the highlights for me last week was watching two grandmothers on the floor with our educator, doing a puzzle with their children.

Our educator often uses everyday materials in her activities and it helps families realise what they can do at home. She responds to carer queries about aspects of children's development

Having an educator has hugely increased the ability of the centre to provide quality early learning to children and to support parents in their parenting role. Some of the activities provided, such as music, would cost parents if they were to do them somewhere else. So it means everybody can access these valuable sessions.

In playgroup our educator targets the 3 to 5 age group and sets up many activities which will help when the children attend pre-school/school. However, I would like to see either a small targeted pre-school on site or a subsidy to attend a community pre-school, such as West Moonah Community Centre pre-school. Launch into Learning. Is n excellent programme which is making a big difference; for various reasons, some families do not feel comfortable accessing it. Many parents have told me that they have taken their child out of child care because they can't afford it and they can't afford pre-school programmes. Therefore some children have never spent time away from their parents prior to attending school. This puts them at higher risk of separation anxiety when they start school.

Pre-school could also provide an opportunity to build the families' confidence and capacity to engage in school. For example, in families where no one works, having pre-school, starting at 9am, helps them get used to morning routines. They can also come into the pre-school to help which would prepare them for being around school situations.

The outcomes and broader impacts of Child and Family Centres to the communities which they are located in.

I think the centre at Chigwell provides a focus for community engagement. I believe we could add to that. I would like to see a closer relationship with the LINC. We want our families to develop their own skills. Sometimes that means providing help in numeracy and literacy. Families seem keener to engage when they already " know a face" so people coming from the LINC to the centre and vice versa, works well. Our aim is not to foster dependency, but to support the adults in developing their own skills so that they can obtain employment. We provide a comfortable place, but we want then to be able to move out of their comfort zone.

I believe that we could have closer links with the wider community such as residents in aged care and local services such as police and firemen.

The level of government funding provided to Child and Family Centres and whether there is a need for more Child and Family Centres in particular communities or locations. (6) Any other matters incidental thereto.

It seems to me that Chigwell Child and Family Centre has become a victim of its own success. Some days we are so busy that I feel I haven't checked in to chat with everybody and may have missed a new family or not noticed that somebody is really struggling.

I am aware that my idea of improving links to services and bringing everybody in highlights the fact that we don't have any extra space. However, I feel that value adding the centre is crucial. We need to build on what we have. The strong connections and positive atmosphere that we encourage makes the possibility of another agency supporting our families successfully, more likely.

I believe that more child and family centres should be built and the existing ones could potentially contribute more to the wellbeing of families.

I feel privileged and proud to be able to be part of CFCC.

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to comment on a place which I absolutely love. When I walk in in the morning and I see the children running from the car park and just excited to be there, I smile and I feel like sprinting in myself!

Yvonne Young

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