

Creating Better Futures for at risk families through effective parent education

1. Summary of the impact

Children born into circumstances of socioeconomic disadvantage are less likely to be exposed to the developmental, educational and social opportunities needed to get a good start in life. Addressing issues before children start primary school can have a positive impact on their trajectories.

Helping parents in disadvantaged families to cope with adversity is crucial. However, many caregivers hesitate to reach out for fear of being criticised, or perhaps because of poor prior experiences. Even well-intentioned professional advice may be unhelpful and ignored if parents feel judged and simply told what to do.

Associate Professor at the UTS School of Education, Dr Nick Hopwood, conducted research to determine some of the best practices in support and community organisations which can be implemented even in the absence of additional funding and capacity. A handbook and website, titled *Creating Better Futures*, have become a valuable resource for professionals working in parent education services.

2. Problem

One in five Australian children is developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains by the time they enter school, and those children from low socio-economic backgrounds are disproportionately represented in this group.

Although primary school is an important milestone to buffer against adversity and redirect these children's trajectory through education, Dr Hopwood argues that unless

we act early, too many children start behind in primary school, and the likelihood is they will struggle to catch up.

However, parenting is a prickly subject, and many caregivers hesitate to ask for help due to fears of being judged, lectured or having their children taken away instead of receiving help. Reaching out for help may also symbolise having failed as a parent and having this negative self-view confirmed by experts.

Moreover, many professionals recognise the difficulty involved in communicating and sharing their expertise without undermining or undervaluing the parents' own knowledge and experiences with their child.

As a result, we need to deliver services and supports that are non-threatening and accessible to parents, while also offering means through which crucial professional expertise can be brought to bear in helping families work through challenges they face.

3. Beneficiaries

The *Creating Better Futures* project aims to help three key beneficiaries.

The most direct beneficiaries are professionals working in child, family and parent education services, whether this is in health care or community organisations. By providing them with best practice tools, they are better equipped to share their expertise with clients in a way that is both effective and respectful.

As a result of the improved service delivery, parents and caregivers who reach out to these organisations have a better experience and are more likely to find that the support they receive is not only respectful, but impactful.

The ultimate beneficiaries are the children who are growing up in low socio-economic conditions and who are at risk of entering school with learning and developmental issues which could have been prevented through early intervention.

4. Approach to impact

The impact of parenting is a widely studied field, exploring issues of empathy, parent-child interactions, child development and milestones as well as mental health overall. Dr Hopwood has leveraged his specialisation in education and learning to develop his approach to the issue.

The three-year research project conducted between 2015 and 2017 called *Creating Better Futures*, involved a combination of observing parenting support live as it happened, and talking to parents, volunteers and practitioners. Over 100 parents and 70 professionals participated in the research over three phases. Dr Hopwood and his research team conducted 130 interviews and 71 observations.

Data collection occurred in NSW, Tasmania and South Australia and was spread across 11 kinds of parenting support services including parenting groups, day stay services, child and family centres, home visits, a toddler clinic, peer support groups, supported play groups, and a wellbeing service.

Dr Hopwood argues that often the interaction between parents and experts is ineffective because of the way expertise might be delivered. An impactful approach, he explains, is not about the professional selecting relevant knowledge to share with the parent, but rather a two-way relationship in which both the professional and the parents combine their knowledge to make improvement possible.

The first crucial ingredient is providing caregivers with a better understanding of their children's needs and their role as parents. This may include practical knowledge - such as interpreting the meaning of a child's cry - but also a broader understanding of what is required to meet the demands of parenting.

The second crucial ingredient is providing parents with the tools and techniques needed to take control of the situation. This includes suggesting multiple possibilities of action where the same default response to a parenting situation may not have worked in the past. As such, parents are given a range of options to choose from and have an understanding of what they will achieve and why.

Both of these ingredients together - understanding the world around them and knowing how they can make a change in this world - is what Dr Hopwood calls 'learning'. His research is aimed at improving the professionals' ability to enable learning in interaction with parents so that parents feel empowered rather than, as Dr Hopwood puts it, feeling judged and 'bossed around by an expert who knows it all'.

A key objective of the research project was to produce practical outcomes that could be implemented in the current structure. Dr Hopwood recalls a blunt but honest remark by one professional who said, 'We don't need you to tell us that we need more time and money.'

With this in mind, Dr Hopwood focused on tangible and feasible actions that professionals and organisations could implement without additional resources or having to overhaul the structure of their organisation.

Through observations with professionals, Dr Hopwood identified small actions which appear to have the greatest impact on the relationship between caregivers and professionals, and what becomes possible through that relationship. Importantly, the research hoped to demonstrate to professionals the power of aspects of their work they might have overlooked or viewed as mundane or insignificant.

One of the many examples was to share observations of child and parent behaviour which emphasised positive development. One professional said, 'I noticed that your child held your hand when crossing the parking lot to get here. How great is it that she has learned that habit for her safety?'. This small comment had a significant effect on the caregiver who realised their child was already doing things well thanks to good parental guidance. This approach alleviates some of the fears they may have leading up to appointments and draws attention to the fact that they are in fact already meeting some of the demands of parenting without noticing.

In another instance, a mother might be convinced that her child does not love her. The professional might once again share an observation such as, 'When you left the room, your child was nervous but once she recognised your voice next door she felt better.' These kinds of comments draw on what is happening between parents and children in order to highlight the importance of parents' actions, revealing parents' strengths, and

pointing to what they might do next. Noticing relevant features requires professional expertise, but is experienced by parents as affirming and respectful.

For the second step, impacting change in a situation, Dr Hopwood found similar examples of professionals providing practical tools for parents dealing with a difficult situation at home. In one instance, a mother was so distressed by her crying child that she feared she would either harm the child or harm herself. She genuinely felt that these were her only two options for handling the situation. In this case, it was important for the professional to recognise the difficulty facing the parent and to work jointly with her to find a solution. This was not about choosing one awful action or another, but finding a way out in which the parent could be available for the child while also managing her anxiety. In this case, the solution lay in breathing practices and using a door as a temporary barrier to regain calm and control. Such simple techniques were quite powerful in helping parents cope with extraordinarily stressful situations.

Over the course of three years, Dr Hopwood gathered and analysed best practice examples, with particular attention to small actions with the big impacts, which take up very little extra time and resources.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

In 2018 the research findings were openly made accessible in the form of a handbook found on the [Creating Better Futures](#) website. The handbook provides information on the research, as well as worksheets, information and practical advice for professionals dealing with parents and children.

Dr Hopwood also delivers workshops on the research findings and is now in the process of promoting the findings to reach more organisations. His next step is to connect to government departments and raise more awareness of these best practice strategies nationwide.

His research has also been shared with the academic community in the form of publications, presentations and conferences.

5.2. Impact

Creating Better Futures was recently completed by Dr Hopwood who now dedicates much of his time and resources to making the research available to organisations who work in parent education.

He hopes that as the result of his work, children will receive the help and care needed to enter school better prepared despite the adversity they may be facing at home. Dr Hopwood explains that impact in this area is a 'slow burner' and is not necessarily a goal which can be achieved quickly and measurably.

However, he is encouraged by the small wins in the individual lives of the families and professionals he has met. One memorable example offered by Dr Hopwood was of a child whom he met three times during the research project. In the first meeting, the child was aggressive and tried to hit him with a rake in a moment of frustration during outdoor play. The second time, the child was no longer physically aggressive, but still found many aspects of play hard and could resort to screaming and shouting at others. By the final meeting, he was not only more able to play happily with others, but also keen to sit on Dr Hopwood's lap during story time - something that was unthinkable several months before.

This, and other examples like it, are thanks to the hard work of the professionals who were willing to try out new ways of communicating and working with parents.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

Dr Hopwood has been conducting educational research since 2002. While he has consistently been interested in what and how people learn, his focus on services for families with children began when he joined UTS in 2010.

During a long-term observational study of the Residential Unit of Karitane, he recognised the potential impact of support services for families, and became

passionate about using research to better understand this process and help practitioners and services improve.

Dr Hopwood collaborated with UTS Research Associate Dr Teena Clerke on this project and acknowledges the important contributions of UTS researchers Belinda Gottschalk and Anne Nguyen.

6.2. External enabling factors

The *Creating Better Futures* project was funded by the Australian Research Council in the form of a Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA).

UTS played a key supporting role in securing this funding.

Furthermore, Dr Hopwood received a faculty R+AMP award for community engagement which assisted development of workshops, the website and distribution of research findings back to professionals and organisations.

Dr Hopwood also feels that the UTS brand carried well in the world of community organisations and enabled him to establish good contacts and relationships to gather data.

7. Challenges

As with any research, there are bureaucratic and funding considerations, particularly with regard to community engagement and once the project is finalised and findings published. Dr Hopwood argues that the current system and research lifecycle does not allow for much engagement time. It is for this reason that many organisations also fear the 'drive by researcher' who will simply gather data, never return and provide the results behind pay walls for a selected audience only.

However, faculty initiatives as well as government pressure may be changing this trend in the near future and Dr Hopwood firmly believes that research must benefit the community as a whole.

Another key challenge when working with disadvantaged families is an emotional one. It can be difficult to hear people's stories and witness their struggles, and it is a daunting task to tackle the complexities of poverty and adversity.

Even so, Dr Hopwood's motivation and enthusiasm for change remain unshaken, arguing that just because something is impossible to solve, it is not an excuse not to try to make it better. In his words, it is important to keep looking for what is possible, how you can make it even more possible and how you can make it possible for more people.

8. Associated research

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9. References

<https://www.creating-better-futures.org/>