



Supporting parents

...parents, families and communities have the primary role in safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of their children and young people and should be supported in carrying out their role.¹

Demographic profile

- Western Australia is home to 557,790 children aged 0 to 17 years, representing 23.0 per cent of the total population of WA.²
- 27.4 per cent (148,797) of WA children and young people live outside the metropolitan area, mainly in the Bunbury and South West region.³
- There are 31,288 Aboriginal children and young people representing 5.6 per cent of all children and young people in WA.⁴
- Almost two-thirds (64.4%) of Aboriginal children and young people live outside the Perth metropolitan area compared to less than one-third (28.9%) of non-Aboriginal children and young people.⁵
- The number of children and young people in WA increased by 71,331, or 14.7 per cent, between 2002 and 2012. The strongest increase (22.4%) occurred in the early childhood age group of 0 to 8 years – the result of a high birth rate in recent years.⁶
- There were 32,259 births registered in Western Australia in 2011, approximately 835 (2.7%) more than the number registered in 2010 (31,424).⁷
- The number of births registered in Western Australia has increased by 34.4 per cent since 2001 when 24,002 births were registered.⁸

The importance of supporting parents

Parents⁹ have arguably the most crucial role in children and young people's development from birth through the transition to adulthood.

In early childhood the evidence is unequivocal: parents' interactions and the environments they provide have a significant impact on children's cognitive, language, social and emotional development.¹⁰

Parents' relationships with, and care for, their children remain important through every stage of development, from early childhood into childhood and adolescence, although the nature and impact varies with age.^{11 12 13} Responsive, involved, warm and consistent parenting is associated with positive child and adolescent developmental outcomes. Conversely, poor parenting can be highly detrimental.^{14 15 16 17}

Consistent parenting that develops strong relationships with parents has been found to positively influence adolescents' self-esteem, academic achievement, social competence, resilience and mental health, and decrease the incidence of risk-taking behaviour including alcohol use.^{18 19 20 21 22 23}

Research clearly shows that both mothers' and fathers' relationships with their children and their parenting style are important for child and adolescent development.^{24 25 26}

Children and young people consistently identify a supportive and loving family as fundamental to their wellbeing and specifically, parents as one of the main sources of advice and support.^{27 28}

Most parents take their role very seriously and are consciously trying to do the 'right' thing.^{29 30} Many parents state they are broadly confident in their parenting skills and are coping well.^{31 32}

However, there is general agreement that parenting is now more challenging, stressful and complex than ever before^{33 34 35 36 37} and a significant proportion of parents report that they lack confidence, feel unsupported and that their needs are only being partially met.^{38 39 40 41 42} Research has found that a majority of parents require resources and support from time-to-time⁴³ and that parents can find parenting demanding and stressful.^{44 45 46} Some parents do not feel well prepared when their first child is born⁴⁷ and issues such as persistent crying and sleep problems cause stress.⁴⁸ Parents can also find adolescence a challenge as young people increasingly seek autonomy, peers become a significant influence and the parent-child relationship changes.^{49 50}

For other families, factors such as poverty, mental health problems, substance abuse, intellectual disability, lack of social support, stress and individual child characteristics (for example, disability, chronic illness and temperament) can significantly impact on family functioning and parenting.^{51 52 53}

The support available to parents, both informal and formal, is an important factor in their capacity to parent.⁵⁴ Supportive community attitudes;^{55 56} practical and social support from extended family, friends and community;^{57 58} timely information about child development and parenting issues;^{59 60} and access to quality programs, services and facilities^{61 62} are all crucial.

What needs to happen?

Despite the overwhelming evidence for the critical role parents play in their child's development and the need for parents to be well supported,⁶³ it is apparent that in WA support for parents and parenting needs to be given greater priority.

Although a range of evidence-based and effective parenting programs and services are offered by government, non-government and private agencies in WA, they are not sufficiently coordinated or integrated. There are substantial gaps in both regional and metropolitan areas, and for parents of primary school age children and adolescents.^{64 65 66}

This is not a problem faced by WA alone. Throughout Australia existing services are struggling to meet the needs of parents, particularly those with complex needs. Waiting lists, inaccessibility and limited ability to provide timely, tailored and cohesive support are consistent problems.⁶⁷

National and international research (particularly in the area of early childhood) has concluded that a different approach to service delivery is necessary, one where programs, services and policies are provided to all parents but with a scale and intensity proportional to the level of need and vulnerability of individual families ('proportionate universality').^{68 69}

With this model a broad range of inclusive and non-stigmatising universal services and programs are provided to all parents and integrated with additional services for groups with specific needs and those who experience barriers to accessing universal services.^{70 71} Delivering services in this way was identified in the Benevolent Society's paper *An integrated approach to early childhood development* as one of the key features of effective integrated services for supporting families.⁷²

Research as part of the Engaging Families in the Early Childhood Development Story project concluded that only a minority of parenting initiatives are universally available to any parent or carer with 70 per cent of them being targeted to specific groups.⁷³

Other features of effective integrated services include:

- a broad range of information and services which are accessible in a variety of locations and formats (formal and informal)
- multiple single entry points to services (no wrong door)
- targeted and specialist services which are embedded in universal services
- assertive outreach to isolated and vulnerable families
- direct services which are co-located or 'virtually' integrated.⁷⁴

Integration at the whole-of-government level is also important and can be achieved by identifying a lead department responsible for services or combining existing programs and services into a single service system, and is a means of reducing duplication and simplifying funding.^{75 76}

An integrated approach can lead to less fragmented services and improved access to services which better meet parents' needs.⁷⁷ This is particularly the case when integration extends to other universal services, for example, when universal and targeted parent programs and services are integrated with childcare and school programs.^{78 79}

Not only does support for parents need to be universally available it also should be ongoing.^{80 81} Parents are seeking timely, non-judgemental and credible information, advice that is relevant to their child or circumstances and flexibility in the provision of services. They feel comprehensive information from various providers should be provided as a single, consolidated resource, which is accessible by a range of methods.⁸²

Only one third (34%) of parents surveyed in Anglicare WA's survey of Western Australian parents of school age children did not want additional parenting-related information or advice.⁸³

Work undertaken by the Centre for Community Child Health identified the features which are common to effective services for young children and their families (including parent support programs).

Effective services were found to:

- fit within a service system that is comprehensive, integrated and has a whole-of-government approach⁸⁴
- provide a broad range of support – financial, social, emotional and practical⁸⁵
- take account of families' varying levels of personal resources, education and confidence⁸⁶
- be based on individual needs and priorities and respond flexibly to them^{87 88}
- work as partners with parents and communities⁸⁹
- be sensitive and responsive to family, cultural, ethnic and socio-economic diversity^{90 91}
- provide relationship-based services and programs⁹²
- strengthen a family's community links and utilise community resources to meet their needs⁹³
- undertake regular evaluation and monitoring to guide improvement and ensure outcomes.⁹⁴

In summary, there are five key priorities to improve support for parents in WA.

1. To reduce duplication and fragmentation the role of the Department for Communities is enhanced to be the lead government agency responsible for coordinating the planning, provision and funding of all parenting services and programs across the State. An audit of parenting programs and services would be an important basis for planning.
2. Increase investment to ensure universal parent support is available flexibly to all Western Australian parents at any stage of their child's development through to adulthood, with the service delivery mechanism responsive to the stage, specific needs and range of issues of individual families. Examples include home visits from child health nurses after the birth of every baby, parenting information provided from schools, a central online resource providing information, seminars, personalised advice and support.
3. Develop targeted parenting support programs that are seamlessly integrated with universal parent support services to ensure easy access or referral for parents and specific groups needing greater support.
4. Expand the availability of evidence-based parenting programs, both universal and targeted, to a level that meets the diverse cultural needs of all WA parents.⁹⁵ This includes providing services equitably to regional and remote areas of the State, particularly for parents of school age children and adolescents.
5. Increase community awareness of the importance of supporting parents in their role and services and resources that are available to them.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People developed the *Wellbeing Monitoring Framework* to monitor and report on the wellbeing of Western Australian children and young people. The third report *Building Blocks: Best practice programs that improve the wellbeing of children and young people – Edition One* provides examples of a number of evidence-based parenting programs. The report is available at ccyp.wa.gov.au

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