Information needs of socioeconomically disadvantaged parents

Final draft

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Abbreviations
CALD  Culturally and linguistically diverse
DEECD  Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
HIPPY  Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters
MCHN  Maternal Child Health Nurse
PACTS  Parents as Career Transition Supports

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Summary

The Brotherhood of St Laurence’s Research and Policy Centre has undertaken primary and secondary research to identify the information needs and channels of parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds in Victoria for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The research aims to inform the Communications Division of ways to better target support, deliver information and engage parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Parents’ access to information and the barriers to searching, finding or understanding information are closely related to parents’ access to the people and organisations that provide information, whether these are community or government services or schools. This research focused on access to information but discussed access to services where it helps in understanding the barriers. This understanding is required to develop effective communication strategies to engage socioeconomically disadvantaged parents.

The research took place from August to December 2008 and included parents of children across all age groups (0–18 years), in inner and outer metropolitan as well as regional locations.

Methodology

The research encompassed desktop and library research as well as empirical research. A literature review was first undertaken in the areas of parental involvement/engagement, parental influence on educational outcomes, parent–school communication, parents’ information seeking behaviours and channels, and their barriers to engagement. A policy sweep on parental engagement strategies complemented the literature review. Additionally, DEECD staff (in the Early Childhood Executive, and in the Education Regeneration and Community Partnerships division within the Office of Government School Education) were consulted to identify vital stakeholders for interviews.

The principal methods of qualitative data collation were interviews and focus groups:

- expert interviews with 18 staff1 in local government and services, as well as in the community sector, ranging from maternal and child health to secondary schools
- focus groups with a total of 49 parents across the three stages (early childhood, primary school and secondary school) and areas (inner and outer Melbourne, regional Victoria)
- detailed semi-structured interviews with 5 parents across the three stages and areas

The guiding research questions were:

- How do parents gain information about early childhood services and schools for their children?
- What are the barriers to their gaining the information they need?
- What are the barriers to parents acting on the information they receive?
- What recommendations can be made to DEECD about applying the research findings?

Review of literature and current policy initiatives

Research confirms the positive effects parental involvement can have upon children’s development and major transitions, from preschool to primary school, primary to secondary school and secondary to further education, training or employment pathways. The extent to which parents engage in school issues and attend school functions has an impact on their children’s academic achievement.

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1 Staff is used throughout this report as a collective term for departmental, school and early childhood employees who were consulted.
This involvement can be bolstered if parents are successfully engaged by their local school community. A good family–school partnership informs and supports a parent’s role as a transition support and co-educator. Yet communication barriers and barriers to information uptake exist especially for parents with low incomes (often in combination with low education levels, poor skills, unemployment or irregular work, low confidence and health issues).

Place influences access to information sources; low literacy affects both understanding of and motivation to engage with written information; low computer literacy or limited computer and internet access keeps parents from accessing electronic newsletters or other online resources; parents from a CALD background may bring different understandings in relation to teachers and schools that hinder their communication; parents’ perception of a hierarchy and teachers’ abuse of their expert role can prevent a mutually supportive relationship between parent and school; as can the lack of understanding about how parents, schools and communities can better connect to enhance student learning outcomes.

Current policy initiatives in Australia and overseas aimed at addressing some of these barriers emphasise face-to-face communication so that parents are engaged at a personal level and information is more effectively disseminated. Moreover, supports need to be put in place so that parents can access ongoing assistance while making use of the information and/or parent support programs.

**Research findings**

The findings have emerged from stakeholder consultations, semi-structured interviews with parents and parent focus groups.

**Information needs and gaps**

Parents require both more general and more specific information on their child’s development and schooling. For parents of younger children, information needs concern universal information on developmental milestones. Accessing services and understanding what they offer also presents as an information gap. Yet staff identified different gaps, most notably in understanding the importance and various types of interactive play between parent and child. Parents of older children reported more specific information needs pertaining to their children, particularly about their progress at school and the options of alternative education pathways. According to staff, both sets of parents are also missing information on the role they can take in their child’s development and education. Many parents did not see themselves an important educational support compared with education professionals.

**Information sources and channels**

Parents’ information sources include services such as Maternal and Child Health Nurses, community support sites, teachers and other school staff, as well as friends. Most written information comes from school newsletters, student journals and for some parents the internet. Parents show a clear preference for personal information sources, ideally in combination with written material for future reference or preparation for meetings with professionals. Parents’ preferred information channels are face-to-face meetings with MCHN for parents of pre-school children and with teachers for parents of older children. The research suggests that the following information channels are particularly effective: facilitated playgroups (either community-based or school-based), community support services, school-based community liaison workers and information nights at school. The information channels which staff and parents in this study tend to find less effective include the Child Health Record (not understood as an information resource on child development for parents), parent–teacher interviews (too infrequent to keep parents up to date), student journals (under-used), health professionals (lacking in supportive relationship).
Barriers to information
Parents of low socioeconomic backgrounds are facing a range of barriers to seeking, finding and understanding information. Often they experience a combination of related barriers, some of which relate to personal circumstances (e.g. low education, low income, low literacy, negative history of schooling, time poverty, poor health, housing insecurity, family-related problems), and some to structural barriers (e.g. difficult access to information, inefficient information channels, unwelcoming information sources, level of language).

Barriers experienced by parents across all age groups are the difficulty to access information from services and communication media (internet, telephone) due to:
- low income
- time poverty due to working hours
- lack of support
- discomfort in accessing services
- low literacy levels
- lacking familiarity with service systems
- lack of transport.

Many parents of younger children are also failing to understand and take up the information provided by the Child Health Record. Parents of school-aged children also experience the time poverty of teachers as a barrier, as well as their own attitude towards schools and teachers, their children’s reluctance to involve their parents and the lack of consistent information from school.

Barriers to acting upon information
Some information is accessible to parents, yet they may fail to take it up for various reasons. Firstly, parents may not recognise the value of professional knowledge of workers in the child development or education field and trust their own judgment better. Secondly, the opposite scenario is when parents fail to recognise their own expertise and put all responsibility for their child’s wellbeing and development onto the early childhood expert or teacher. Thirdly, parents may expect too much of the information provided to them and react adversely to information if they have been disappointed by the usefulness of previous information. Fourthly, some parents make decisions based on reasons, motivations or information different from formal sources.

All of these barriers are strongly related to parents’ self-confidence and understanding of their role in their children’s education and development in relation to staff in early childhood and educational institutions.

Parental engagement
Parents on the one hand and schools and services on the other hand often hold different understandings of the adequate level of, approach to and responsibility for parental engagement. One effective approach to parental engagement is to focus on the children rather than parents. This is based on the belief that a shared interest in the child’s progress and development is the stronger incentive for parental involvement than the parent’s learning as such. Early childhood staff tended to identify the issue of parents not being adequately engaged as the most important problem, while the principal issue identified in the secondary school years is a failure by schools to adequately engage with parents.

Engaging highly disadvantaged parents ideally occurs through trusted sources, which vary from site to site. Examples are community-based playgroups or ethnic community leaders. Secondly, the provision of information is ideally combined with the offer of support or maintenance.
Implications and recommendations

As the literature attests, there is a positive correlation between parental involvement or engagement in a child’s education and educational attainment and school retention. In light of this, if the Victorian Government is committed to addressing educational disadvantage and achieve a 90 per cent retention rate in all state schools, low-income parents need to be informed and engaged in a manner that is most relevant and convenient for them. While updating current communication techniques by making online information and school newsletters more attractive and user-friendly is a step in the right direction, more needs to be done to ensure that this information is taken up and used by the estimated 40 per cent of parents not currently reached by the department.

Parents on low incomes often experience a range of linked problems which impact on their capability to seek, understand and act upon information related to their children’s education and learning. This requires a holistic response combining information with support. Some parents may only be contacted through outreach work. It is vital to recognise that investment in parents’ capabilities and strengths empowers them in the long term. Literature, policy initiatives and good practice examples suggest together with the present research that a successful parental engagement strategy needs to focus on personal communication. Written information needs to be brief and simply worded as well as illustrated so parents with low literacy skills can understand it. Schools and services need to be welcoming, strengthen parents’ self-confidence and proactively seek a relationship with them. From the research findings, this report offers the following recommendations:

Information content and language
- More effective information is needed in key areas such as kindergarten, child development, transitions and alternative education pathways.
- Focus on children may be more effective than focus on parents.
- Content needs to consider culturally diverse audiences.
- Everyday language is essential to reach all audiences.
- More pictorial material is needed.

Information dissemination strategies
- Communication occurs most effectively in person, accompanied by information in writing.
- Community facilitated playgroups need to be supported as a prime information channel.
- Schools, the preferred information channel for parents of school-aged children, need to provide more timely and face-to-face communication opportunities for parents.
- Television campaigns are useful for key messages.
- DVD resources should be developed on aspects of parenting.

Parental engagement strategies
- Outreach workers should be attached to universal childcare settings.
- Parent liaison workers would improve parent–school communication.
- Schools should be supported to run informal school-based events such as showcasing student activity to help engage parents.
- Schools should be required to conduct accessible induction programs for parents, especially at the start of secondary school.
- Professional development for teachers must address parental engagement in the context of social exclusion.
- Effective internal communication at schools in relation to families needs to be ensured.

Measures such as these would go a long way to building effective partnerships between parents and early child services or schools, which are critical to supporting children’s development and learning.
Introduction

The Brotherhood of St Laurence’s Research and Policy Centre has undertaken primary and secondary research to identify the information needs and channels of parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds in Victoria, for the Communications Division, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The research aims to inform the department of ways to better target support, deliver information and engage such parents with key information.

Parents’ access to information and the barriers around searching, finding or understanding information are closely related to their access to the people and organisations that provide information, whether these are community or government services or schools. This research focused on access to information but discussed access to services where it helped in understanding the barriers. This understanding is required to develop effective communication strategies to engage socioeconomically disadvantaged parents.

The research, which took place from August to December 2008, included parents of children across all age groups (0–18 years) and a blend of inner and outer metropolitan, as well as regional, locations.

Methodology

The research encompassed desktop and library research as well as empirical research. A literature review was first undertaken in the areas of parental involvement/engagement, parental influence on educational outcomes, parent–school communication, parents’ information seeking behaviours and channels, and their barriers to engagement. A policy sweep on parental engagement strategies complemented the literature review. Additionally, DEECD staff were consulted to identify vital stakeholders for interviews.

The principal methods of qualitative data collation were interviews and focus groups:

- expert interviews with 18 staff in local government and services, as well as in the community sector, ranging from maternal and child health to secondary schools
- focus groups with a total of 49 parents across the three stages (early childhood, primary school and secondary school) and areas (inner and outer Melbourne, regional Victoria)
- detailed semi-structured interviews with 5 parents across the three stages and areas.

The parent focus groups and interviews took place between 28 October and 12 December 2008, at sites convenient to the research participants. Interviews were mostly conducted face to face, with a few by telephone. Focus groups were conducted in community settings and facilitated by one or two BSL researchers. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed.

Research participants

The selection of staff for interview was based on consultation with different areas of DEECD (in the Early Childhood Executive, and in the Education Regeneration and Community Partnerships division within the Office of Government School Education) and with the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s services (Early Years and Through School to Work transitions). (See Appendix 1 for a list of participants)

Focus group and parent interview participants were recruited through BSL services (Napier Street Child and Family Resource Centre, Collingwood Childcare, the BSL Homework Club, Youth

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2Staff is used throughout this report as a collective term for departmental, school and early childhood employees who were consulted.
Pathways Frankston, the Refugee Brokerage program, Ecumenical Migration Centre) and their networks (see Appendix 2). Participants were defined as being from a low-socio economic background as most were in receipt of government benefits and a healthcare card. While a few participants did not match this criterion, they were still defined as low socio-economic due to accessing BSL services.

All participating parents were paid $40 for their time. All participants were female and many had more than one child. No fathers answered the advertisements to participate. Each focus group concentrated on particular age groups, but parents tended to also draw on experiences with their other children.

Research questions
The guiding research questions were:

- How do parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds gain information about early childhood services and schools for their children?
- What are the barriers to their gaining the information they need?
- What are the barriers to parents acting on the information they receive?
- What are the most effective ways for organisations to communicate with these families?
- What recommendations can be made to DEECD about applying the research findings?

These questions informed the different questionnaires which were developed for stakeholder interviews, and parent interviews and focus groups.

At two stages, the researchers met with others from the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health who undertook a parallel research project focused on parents from CALD backgrounds. The purpose was primarily to avoid duplication in the data collection by understanding each other’s research scope and approach. The first meeting discussed conceptual and methodological approaches and the second one involved exchanging experiences with the data collection and interpretations of preliminary research findings.

Limitations of the methodology
As agreed, access to parents was sought through the client base and networks of the BSL services. While this approach was likely to recruit research participants from disadvantaged backgrounds, it was by definition not suited to attract the most disengaged parents, who would be not at all connected to services. Indeed the parents who came along to the focus groups and interviews by doing so showed some interest in questions related to their children’s development or schooling.

This limits the representativeness of the participants’ responses for the most disadvantaged and disengaged. To some extent this limitation was been counteracted by consulting staff who were experienced with working with a wide range of disengaged parents.

3 Literature review
An ever-increasing body of research from North America, Europe and Australia highlights the positive effect of parental involvement on a child’s development and education. There has been much discussion on how to better support and sustain such involvement. While the terms parental involvement and parental engagement are used interchangeably in the literature, this report defines them differently. Parental involvement is discussed in terms of parents’ impact on childhood development and school achievement; while parental engagement is considered to be the communication, or lack thereof, between parents, their school community and local service providers. However the terms are not mutually exclusive. As Constantino’s use (2003, p.5) of the
word engagement denotes, the two overlap, with parental engagement as ‘the interaction between schools and families and the degree to which families are involved in the educational lives of their children’.

The following section discusses the role parents can take in a child’s development and schooling. While the home environment can have a crucial impact on a child’s outcomes, a successful family–school partnership is integral for building on the positive results achieved in the early years. Parent–school communication is an important ingredient in this partnership as a key determinant of effective parental engagement.

Role of parents in their children’s transitions

Parents play a unique and vital role in their children’s education, from the early childhood years to the transitions from primary to secondary school, and beyond into further education, training and employment. A significant body of research has explored the positive impact parents have as co-educators, supporters, and sources of information on their child’s development and learning during the primary, middle and secondary school years.

Early years and primary school

A supportive family environment for children in their early years can improve their cognitive (intellectual) and non-cognitive (socio-emotional) skills. This consequently improves their learning outcomes, and ensures a successful transition from home to school and through other life transitions (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000; Heckman 2006). Thurston (2005), assessing the effectiveness of parental involvement on the education of 1445 elementary school children, demonstrated that attendance at parent–teacher conferences, PTA membership, volunteering at school, homework checking and homework help are associated with both cognitive and non-cognitive development, in the form of high scores on achievement tests and a low incidence of behavioural problems.

Middle school

Parental involvement and support are also crucial for a smooth transition from middle to secondary school, as children and adolescents explore future career options. In a cross-sectional study of juniors from six secondary schools in North Carolina, Otto (2000, p.117) found that ‘parents, particularly mothers, are allies and resources for career counsellors in facilitating the career development process’. Similarly Krache (2001), examining the influence of parental behaviours on 236 ninth graders’ career exploration, found that parental openness to adolescents’ issues and concern with promoting career planning significantly increased their child’s career exploration.

Secondary school

This pattern of communication also yields positive results for parent and adolescent in the latter years of secondary school. Jeynes (2005) asserts that the extent to which parents discuss school issues and attend school functions has a positive impact on adolescent academic achievement, while Russell and Wardman (1998, p.9), researching the information types and sources utilised by 462 British school leavers, found that ‘on the whole, young people are more likely to have discussed the various [career resource] materials with their parents than with their careers teachers or advisers’. More recently, a study of 12,915 young people completing Year 12 in Queensland found that parents were one of the primary sources of information on transition options (Whiteley 2001). The Brotherhood of St Laurence PACTS project (Parents as Career Transition Supports) aims to empower parents in their role as transition supports for their children, through interactive workshops on up-to-date relevant information and skills to communicate with their teenagers about transitions. The project evaluation found parents reported an increased knowledge about transition options and a better ability to communicate with young people about such issues, along with reduced feelings of isolation due to meeting and sharing experiences with other parents (Bedson & Perkins 2006).
Parent–school communication

Good parent–school communication can facilitate and inform a parent’s role as a transition support and co-educator. However, a school’s ability to engage and sustain a partnership with families can be hindered by a number of factors.

Early years

In examining parent communication practices used by early childhood staff in five accredited child care centres in Victoria, Australia, Hughes and MacNaughton (2002) found that parents and staff rarely exchanged and discussed information about the children due to a consistent lack of time. This problem was exacerbated by staff having to reconcile their professional and expert knowledge of child development with parents’ knowledge of their own child. Not only is this time consuming, it also poses a challenge to the staff members claim as a professional ‘on the basis that they use systematic and theory-based models to create ‘the truth’ about the child whereas parents claim that their anecdotal knowledge of their specific child is ‘the truth’ because they witness the actions and events on which that knowledge is based’ (Hughes & MacNaughton 2002, p.18).

Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) have previously highlighted how interactions between staff and parents are suffused knowledge–power relationships. Reviewing early childhood texts and policy documents, they note ‘problems arise largely from the constant ‘othering’ of parental knowledge by childcare staff’ (Hughes & MacNaughton 2000, p. 242). Such ‘othering’ occurs when early childhood workers regard their professional knowledge as superior to a parent’s knowledge and understanding of their own child. According to Hughes and MacNaughton this is achieved by implying that parental knowledge is inadequate, supplementary and unimportant. To correct this, parents have to be taught how to observe and understand their child’s development so it reflects the knowledge of childcare professionals. Moreover, many programs that seek to involve parents as teachers are often ‘directed at parents from minority ethnic groups and lower socioeconomic strata, who may have insufficient power and/or confidence to use it to refuse ‘involvement’. Ironically, these particular parents’ employment—whether ‘real’ jobs or work-for-benefit schemes—makes it hard for them to become involved because of the number and relative inflexibility of the hours worked (Hughes & MacNaughton 2000, pp.244–5).

These issues of authority and time feature as two paradoxes in MacNaughton’s (2004) research into building respectful relationships between early childhood staff and parents. Despite staff emphasising the importance of always being available to parents, the latter spoke of ‘awkward times’, ‘waiting and waiting until it’s my time’, and ‘no “good” times’ for conversation with staff” (MacNaughton 2004, p.1). Further, when parents said that certain communication methods were irrelevant to their needs, they felt as though they were ‘ruffling feathers’. Consequently, ‘learning not to ‘ruffle feathers’ was something you only had to do when your values and ideas differed to those of the staff” (MacNaughton 2004, p.6).

School years

While research emphasises the positive impact of parent–school partnerships on student learning and educational outcomes, difficulties still exist. Interaction with schools is not solely determined by a parent’s hours of employment. Low-income parents may experience difficulty in connecting and communicating with their children’s teachers due to a perceived hierarchy that can prevent a mutually supportive relationship between parent and school from forming. Thus professional staff may need to develop extra skills in sensitive communication to overcome this barrier.

From focus group data, McDermott and Rothenberg (2001) found that low-income urban parents often felt alienated and unwelcome at school events though they indicated that some teachers, whom they respected, had communicated with them frequently via telephone calls, home visits and newsletters. Using this information, the researchers incorporated a variety of learning activities into an undergraduate teaching subject to improve the student teachers’ skills in communicating with parents from a low socioeconomic status, urban background. Student responses to a follow-up
evaluation survey indicated that ‘there was significant growth in their knowledge of how to conduct family conferences, show authentic interest in family involvement, and communicate in various ways with urban families’ (McDermott et al., 2001 p.15).

Longeran (2006) calls for school cultures to adopt a parent and family-inclusive ethos if they are to successfully educate the whole child with skills necessary for the 21st century. As schools have an increasing role in curriculum topics such as safety, citizenship and drug education, a clearer congruence between what happens at home and at school is necessary to ensure students feel better connected to their family, school and community.

However there appears to be a lack of understanding on how parents, schools and communities can better connect to enhance student learning outcomes. Australian research investigating how to more effectively involve parents and communities in schools to better support students’ learning in the middle years (Years 5–8) found that pupils, families and teachers commonly expressed the view that learning was limited to school and that the interface between schools and communities was not highly permeable (Hayes & Chodkiewicz 2003).

**Barriers to parent–school communication**

The extent to which parents can influence and contribute to their children’s education is mediated by a number of external, independent factors. According to Crozier (1997), a parent’s socioeconomic status has a direct impact upon their ability to intervene in their child’s schooling. He contends that, in spite of the UK Government’s promotion of parents’ role in education and the changing attitude of schools towards parents, these conditions do not address the structural and economic barriers preventing low-income parents from engaging with the education system.

Previous research shows that low-income parents are disadvantaged in accessing information from, and engaging with, schools, early childhood programs and other sources of support and material. This disadvantage manifests in a number of place-based, structural, communication and economic barriers, all of which can adversely impact upon their child’s development and learning.

**Place**

In a study examining the availability of and access to print resources in two low-income and two middle-income neighbourhoods, Neuman and Celano (2001) highlighted the inequity in the number of resources, choice and quality of materials available and public spaces and places for reading between the two-income neighbourhoods. They held that this differential access to reading and writing facilities had important implications for children’s literacy development, with some children more ‘likely to come to school better prepared for the ways of learning and thinking that are nurtured in school’ and others more likely to be unprepared (p.24).

**Digital divide**

Cullen (2001), examining the US, UK, Canadian and New Zealand responses to information and communication technology (ICT) barriers, identified socioeconomic status, low educational achievement and cost as factors which widen the gap between those with ready access to information technology and the knowledge it can provide, and those without such access or skills. A study conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Bond & Horn 2008) on parental experiences of education expenses revealed that ‘forty per cent of parents did not have a computer, giving cost as the main reason, although lacking a functioning phone connection or actual home were other related reasons’ (p. 7). This finding corresponds with the assertion by Dugdale et al. (2005) that the biggest users of Australian government services, and thus those most likely to be on low incomes, are the least likely to be connected to the internet.

**Literacy**

While parents from a low socioeconomic background are often prevented or discouraged from accessing the internet by low levels of computing and technology skills, research also suggests that
their literacy levels can affect their ability and willingness to engage with and access services and print material. According to Mendoza (2003), access to information can be significantly compromised by differences in reading proficiency, understanding of service jargon, vocabulary, and English language levels among parents and program staff.

**Employment**

Analysing data from the American National Longitudinal Survey of Youth – Mother and Child Surveys of 1878 families where mothers worked more than 20 hours per week, Heymann and Earle (2000) found that low-income working mothers who had a child with educational or behavioural problems lacked the paid leave, flexibility and role autonomy to meet with teachers and visit schools to address their child’s needs. Consequently, the authors assert:

> Unless something is done to improve the conditions faced by low-income working parents, poor children who are at risk educationally will find themselves placed further at risk by barriers to parental involvement (Heyman et al. 2000, p.843).

Similarly, Weiss et al. (2003) explored the complex relation between employment and family involvement in children’s elementary education for low-income women. Drawing on a six-year longitudinal study of 390 children, their analysis suggested that structural features of work such as flexible schedules, communication resources and accessibility may facilitate educational involvement for low-income mothers who are time-poor.

**CALD background**

While cultural and linguistic diversity is an important factor to be considered in this context, this area remained unexplored in this research project due to parallel research undertaken by the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

**Information seeking behaviours and channels**

In a US study investigating the information environment, needs and searching patterns of low-income African-American households, Spink and Coles (2001, p.54) found that participant information seeking focused on their family and neighbours; and information needs were ‘place-based’, relating primarily to the challenges of daily life. External channels such as print or web media and public libraries were significantly underused, with the resources and information necessary to improve education and employment prospects seen as remote from participants’ day-to-day existence.

However, other researchers argue that while people may choose other people as their preferred sources of information, the relationship between information seeker and source is not always a personal one (Birkel & Repuucci 1983): advice is for example also sought from people with better resources (Johnson 2004).

Where research suggests some people from low-income backgrounds utilise personal networks as information channels due to their low literacy levels (Fisher et al. 2004), electronic media are also used to combat this barrier. A study of low-income older persons found that television was their primary source of health information. Moreover, despite having no cognitive or visual impairment, subjects had trouble understanding information given to them in print form by health providers (Weiss et al. 1995). The authors argued that for health information to be received and understood by some low-income seniors, it must be transmitted through literacy-appropriate communication methods.
4 Policy initiatives

The recent Australian Government *Family-school partnerships framework*, issued by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations provides a vision and a set of principles and strategies aimed at improving partnerships between Australian families and schools. It views families and schools as equal partners in the education of children and young people and identifies the support structures and key dimensions which underpin effective family–school partnerships. The seven key dimensions (communicating, connecting learning at home and at school, building community and identity, recognising the role of the family, consultative decision-making, collaborating beyond the school and participating) are a template for planning partnership activities (DEEWR 2008).

While this framework will prove a beneficial resource for school communities, a number of initiatives have already been implemented to better connect families and schools. Such programs aim to inform, engage and support parents throughout their child’s early, middle and secondary school years. Initiatives range from practical, multidisciplinary support to information provided in print or web-based form. Moreover, several projects incorporate both approaches. While some initiatives specifically aim to assist socioeconomically disadvantaged families, others are examples of successful parental engagement and information provision strategies designed for a wider audience.

Information provision/support programs

**Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), Brotherhood of St Laurence, Australia**

HIPPY is an international initiative, originating from the experimental work of Professor Avima Lombard of the Institute for Innovation at the School of Education of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The program was introduced to Australia in 1997 by the BSL. It has four aims: to foster a love of learning in young children, promoting cognitive and social development and enhancing school readiness; to increase parents’ confidence and skills as their child’s first teacher; to increase participation in school and community life; and to develop work readiness and community leadership skills of participating parents. Families are provided with storybooks and ‘reading and numeracy readiness’ games and activities which the parent works through regularly with their three to five-year-old child. Parents’ skills and confidence are developed through regular home visits and support from ‘home tutors’, and by meetings with other parents. Home tutors are also parents completing the program with their children: this provides many—including newly settled refugees, Aboriginal people and early school leavers—with their first paid work and a path into the workforce. Most home tutors gain a Certificate III in Community Development as part of the program.

**Parents as Career Transition Supports (PACTS), Brotherhood of St Laurence, Australia**

PACTS began as a pilot project run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence on the Mornington Peninsula on Melbourne’s southern fringe. It aims to empower parents to better support their children’s transitions from school to work and/or further education by building parents’ knowledge of post-school pathways and today’s job market. The pilot ran from late 2003 until December 2005, funded by the federal Department of Education, Science and Training as one of 23 Career and Transition (CATS) pilot projects around Australia. The PACTS facilitator training continues to be delivered by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in a range of settings across Australia, including schools and Local Community Partnerships.

**Raising Children Network website, Australia**

The Raising Children Network website, launched in 2006 by the Australian Government, IBM and the ABC, offers parents an array of information and advice. It includes information for parents as individuals (e.g. ‘looking after yourself’) and information to support them in their parenting role. Other information is child-focused and categorised by age, starting from newborns through to schoolchildren, and address the topics of behaviour, communication, healthcare, play and sleep.
The website also has links to other services and supports and hosts its own interactive online forums.

**Team-Up campaign, Ministry of Education, New Zealand**

The Team-Up program, introduced in 2004, provides information, ideas and materials to help parents support their children and become more involved in their education. These include tips for learning at home, behaviour/relationships, school/life balance and career pathways. The program’s website was launched in 2005 to provide people with easy access to information about education. In response to parents’ feedback they did not want to be told to get involved with their child’s learning, fifteen Team-Up television advertisements have aired over the past three years as a less intrusive means of connecting with parents.

**Ready for Kinder, Families in Schools: Building Partnerships for Student Success, USA**

Ready for Kinder helps parents understand how they can actively support their children’s transition from home to kindergarten. The curriculum focuses on how student academic and social development can be ensured through the active participation of parents in the education of their children. FIS staff train schools and agencies to lead the sessions, in addition to working with schools to develop community-wide kindergarten transition plans.

**Parenting for Academic Success: A Curriculum for Families Learning English, The National Center for Family Literacy, USA**

Parenting for Academic Success is a 12-unit curriculum designed for parents from a non-English speaking background. Its goals are twofold: to develop parents’ English language skills and to increase their ability to support their children’s language and literacy development from kindergarten through to grade three. The curriculum has two components: a set of parent workbooks featuring information for parents to support their child’s learning and activities for parents to take home and do with their child.

**Parent Information and Resource Centers, Department of Education, USA**

PIRCs help implement successful and effective parental involvement policies, programs, and activities that improve student academic achievement and that strengthen partnerships among parents, teachers, principals, administrators, and other school personnel in meeting the education needs of children. Funds may be used to help parents use the technology applied in their children’s education; to assist parents to communicate effectively with school personnel; and help parents become active participants in the development, implementation, and review of school improvement plans. Additionally, projects develop resource materials and provide information about high-quality family involvement programs to families, schools, school districts, and others through conferences, workshops, and dissemination of materials. Projects generally include a focus on serving parents of low-income, minority, and limited English proficiency (LEP) children enrolled in elementary and secondary schools.

**Parental engagement**

**Health Home Visiting, Department of Community Services, NSW, Australia**

The Health Home Visiting program conducted in South Western Sydney ensures that new parents are offered a first home visit by a Child and Family Health Nurse. This appointment acts as a conduit to connect the families with the interagency service network so to provide the best possible assessment of need and identify pathways to available services. The visit is part of a continuum of care which allows families identified as vulnerable to receive additional support. Moreover, the program encourages ongoing contact with the network so that a trusted and empowering partnership between parent and professional can. Parents are also assisted to identify resources and skills within the family unit and the community so they can develop confidence to address issues and seek assistance.
Mobile Outreach Therapy Team, NSW, Australia
The Mobile Outreach Therapy Team was developed in response to the observation that disadvantaged families were less likely to access centre-based health services than their wealthier counterparts (CHETRE, 2005). To engage and assist part of this disadvantaged group, MOTT aims to increase school readiness for children of vulnerable families by operating a multitude of services (e.g. speech pathology, occupational therapy and counselling) within the families’ homes, community locations and in community organisations. Akin to the Health Home Visiting program, MOTT’s approach encompasses the child, the family, the school and the community to ensure that all are informed, connected and mutually supported. With the help of a multidisciplinary team, families agree on a time frame and a goal setting process. As of December 2004, 31% of children and families were making high progress with achieving their goals and 69% were making moderate progress (CHETRE, 2005). Of the 110 children assisted by MOTT, 41% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders.

Schools as Community Centres, NSW, Australia
The School as Community Centres program aims to influence the planning and integration of services to better meet the needs of families with young children, from birth to eight years, with a focus on the years prior to school entry. Located in disadvantaged areas, SaCCs aim to ensure children have a healthy and positive start to primary school. Each SaCC project provides a range of activities such as supported playgroups, early literacy programs, health and nutrition initiatives, and parenting programs. While the local SaCC facilitators, schools and interagency partners are responsible for the collaborative planning of such initiatives, the program also aims to strengthen communities and their links to schools and government agencies by seeking and encouraging their participation in delivering SaCC services.

Early Learning Partnerships Project (ELPP), United Kingdom
The ELPP targets ‘hard to reach’/vulnerable parents of children aged 1–3, to encourage them to get involved in activities that support the early learning of their children. A focus is on parents of children identified as at risk of learning delay. Parents are referred through diverse channels such as health visitors, Sure Start Children’s Centres and other early years settings and self referrals. The project also includes funding to upskill the early years workforce, including volunteers, so they can better engage with parents to support their children’s early learning, through training courses.

Engaging Families Initiative (EFI), Bostnet, Boston, USA
EFI is one of four national Parents and Communities for Kids (PACK) initiatives funded by The Wallace Foundation, whose focus is improving learning outcomes for children aged 6 to 10 through activities outside traditional school. The goals of EFI are to increase family involvement, engagement and leadership in children’s academic achievement and informal learning. Since 2002, the initiative has worked with nine Boston-based after-school providers that serve Black and Latino students aged 6–10.

5 Research findings
This section discusses the primary data collected and analysed for this research—that is, from the consultation with staff and interviews and focus groups with parents. To illustrate the findings, direct quotes have been included (marked as ‘parents’ or ‘staff’ with their specific area of expertise). The section follows the structure of the brief, addressing parents’ information needs and gaps, their information sources and channels, barriers to information, barriers to acting upon information and finally parental engagement.

Parents’ information needs and gaps
Parents need information related to their individual child’s progress, development and wellbeing (individual information) as well as information on resources, structures and services for their
child’s care, development and education (general information). The demands for this information varies from parent to parent, but some general patterns have emerged of the information needs (objective information needs) and awareness of information needs (subjective information needs) in relation to the child(ren)’s age.

For example, parents of young children tend to show more awareness of needing general information than parents of older children who seem to be mainly interested in specific information related to their child’s educational development and progress.

In addition to the information needs identified by parents themselves, there are information gaps different staff have identified in relation to parents. Providing parents with opportunities to ask questions and have their questions answered is hence not sufficient. As one early childhood worker devising a parental engagement strategy put it:

Often parents don’t know what to ask. So that’s an issue … Because whilst parents can access whatever they really need to, if they know what to do, it’s a bit different from us helping them to know what to ask … A lot of those parents don’t know what they should know, number one. Or they haven’t had enough education perhaps themselves to realise what’s more important than something else … (Early childhood worker, local government)

Finally, sometimes parents are in fact overloaded with information and do not know how to make sense of it. That seems to be the case, for example, in secondary school with the information packs parents receive at the start of Year 10 or 11.

When parents do get a lot information, it almost is bombarded at them between year 10, year 11 and maybe at the beginning of year 12. Whereas if you take it a step back to say year 8 or half way through year 8, you’ve got a 12-month [window] in which you can start introducing it as almost like step program, instead of having here’s a bulk, take that in now, (Secondary school, community sector)

The issue of information overload was also raised in the area of early childhood:

How parents get information is one thing and then what information they need is another because sometimes they’re overloaded with information. (Early childhood worker, local government)

**Childhood development and learning**

Information on children’s development stages featured as a need mentioned by parents. Participants said they required both information about their individual child and general information against which they can interpret their own child’s progress. This means parents also need advice and facts on what to watch out for in their child(ren)’s development now, what to expect their children to be able to do in the near future and what to do if they suspect their child is experiencing a developmental delay or mental or physical health issue. Without such information, parents may interpret their child’s behaviour as ‘bad’ and sanction that behaviour, while it is in fact the consequence of a health issue; or may disregard signs of problems requiring attention.

While the Child Health Record provided to all new parents by hospitals does provide information on childhood development, some parents did not see or use it as a resource. Rather parents predominantly considered it as a record of their child’s immunisations and vital statistics (see also section on Parents’ information sources and channels, page 16). The perceived gap in child development information can leave parents feeling bewildered and isolated:

I felt lost there for a while after he turned the 9 months, ’cos you’ve got like regular check-ups and then it goes 3, 6, 9 [months], and there’s just a total change in behaviour sometimes, they really grow into their own element. (Parent, interview)
Therefore parents wanted direct, clear and regular information specifically on the topic of development rather than having it packaged with other material. This particularly related to planning for the future, what to expect and how they could encourage and support their child’s learning:

The information that I’m seeking at the moment, ’cos he’s up to a year and a half, so obviously there’s got to be some kind of achievement or things he should be getting a grasp on by that time … some areas that you can encourage or things that you should be keeping an eye out for at this particular point in time just to be aware of (Parent, interview)

This information need was heightened if parents suspected their child was not developing as expected. Parents desired accessible material on how to recognise symptoms and what to look out for.

[What information do you need?] Oh god, a really wide array of different information in regards to my own needs, (my child’s) needs. Future needs. Where he should be up to in milestones, all that sort of (information). (Parent, interview)

In conjunction with this information and advice on what to do, parents also felt at a loss about whom to see and which services to access for support:

Not enough information out there about specialists and who to go to and how to go about getting appointments. There’s not really enough information about where to go, who to turn to, who’s the best person to go to, in whose area. (Parent, interview)

**Children’s progress and development at school**

The issue of progress and learning also featured in discussions with parents of primary and secondary students. Many participants felt they received inadequate feedback from the school on their child’s general progress and subject selection. More of this information is required by parents at more regular intervals. One parent of a primary school-aged child suggested:

There is no information about the students themselves, on what level they’re actually at in their learning, progress and so forth. For example with the preps you get half way through the year, they say ‘OK, we’ve done this sort of a progress in our learning. And now we gonna go on to this next step’. But through the year we’re not getting a run-down to an extent of knowing where this child is learning, where they’re up to. (Parent, focus group)

Parents also wanted to receive information about their child’s behaviour in the classroom and the playground.

Further, parents wanted to be informed if their child was struggling or requiring extra assistance in the classroom. Participants said they wanted to be contacted when and if this happened rather than being informed biannually, via school reports or at parent–teacher interviews:

I’ve been in a situation just recently where my daughter has needed to see, or I have needed to see, every single teacher; and not one of them has given me feedback for me to come and see them, it was not ‘necessary’. So I made appointments for every teacher and in every class she was falling down yet nobody asked to see me. So as far as I was concerned that was really … absolutely ridiculous (Parent, focus group)

Another area where parents seem to be often misinformed is their child’s school attendance as there was limited feedback from schools when students were marked as absent. Given the correlation between school attachment and progress, this is an important piece of information which parents often may not have until the parent–teacher interview. Parents need to be told of such absenteeism promptly so that it can be addressed quickly and future truancy prevented.
Understanding of the importance and 'type' of play

Staff observed that parents often do not engage in play with their children because they do not think of play as an important part of the child’s learning and development.

Parents don’t understand what play is. They think play is just outside mucking around playing but they don’t actually understand the relationship of that and to brain development and to learning outcomes so that’s a big transition for some parents to have that communicated to them. (Early childhood worker, community sector)

Consequently, many parents fail to consider child-care and kindergarten as places where their children are learning and their development is fostered. They view those institutions as different from and less useful and important for the child than school.

Parenting practices and support programs

Parents of younger children expressed a need for updated, consistent information about breastfeeding, information on alternative parenting practices, and suggestions on managing children with behavioural problems. One parent found that MCHNs varied in their approach to breastfeeding: the information provided was inconsistent and at times seemed contradictory. The same was noted for information regarding appropriate discipline techniques. Some parents felt comfortable with physically disciplining their children, having been told that it is legal.

I went down to QEC, a part of DHS, and they told me it’s not illegal and if I have to, to do it. (Parent, focus group)

However most parents were unsure of the merits of ‘smacking’ and were seeking information on how to discipline without smacking and how to address other behavioural issues. Parents find current available information outdated and when presented in electronic form, ‘staged’ and superficial:

And also it would be good, if you’ve got a mum’s group starting at maternal health centre, actually having a DVD playing on ways of dealing with, you know, certain situations, but I have noticed ’cos I only went to one not that long ago, that they’re very outdated, very old. They’re videos, not DVD … and it’s very staged. Very unnatural I suppose. Yeah, it’s very ancient so it’s something more updated, more fresh would be better. (Parent, interview)

In addition to discipline, information on parenting practices from other cultures was mentioned as an information gap. This is particularly pertinent given Victoria’s multicultural population. One parent said:

I love to hear and I find inspiring to hear any information that is … maybe research into all different sorts of ancient cultures and the different things that they use as parenting techniques. Things like that I’d love to hear to connect cultures in our society more and create acuity and I think that will help us feel things more … connect more people to their job of parenting. (Parent, interview)

Some parents made mention of needing information on how to access available in-house family support services and school aides. They viewed this support as a component of their child’s development and learning. The same parent noted that such support could also combat feelings of social isolation, which are less prevalent in stronger communities:

There’s no community to use to help with the children, so there’s a lot of isolated parents that spend every—I spend every, almost every day with my children. I never go to the toilet by myself or have a bath by myself, and I think … bringing that ancient culture information back to society might help create that community in society again. (Parent, interview)
Kindergarten
Parents of young children expressed four distinct information needs regarding kindergarten or preschool. Firstly, there appeared to be uncertainty concerning what kindergarten provides and how it differs from child-care: parents lack information about the importance of a kindergarten curriculum for their child’s social and cognitive development.

Secondly, parents were unsure at what age their child should commence kindergarten. Thirdly, they were not clear about the process of moving from their current care arrangements to a kindergarten. Fourthly, while parents were able to access kindergarten enrolment forms fairly easily, they lacked information on how each kindergarten may differ in terms of site, environment, and early childhood workers:

My husband because he works for La Trobe City … and he hasn’t even got that information … he just brought me the enrolment forms and I’m like okay, but I want to look at kindergartens, I want to find out what they’re like. I want to find out who the workers are, you know. (Parent, interview)

Also, parents said they find the bureaucratic process of applying for a kindergarten place and the perceived lack of choice of centre only served to increase their need for specific information:

They’ve tied the four local kindergartens in the area altogether onto one form, feeling that that’s easier because people don’t have to up four separate forms for each kindergarten, but I found it harder … It seemed really impersonal to me and the idea of filling out a form and not having a choice of which kinder she goes to and just pick of the draw … made me just sort of not interested in it at all, because it’s really important to me to go to the kinder and investigate on a personal level and get to know the environment and the teachers. (Parent, interview)

Moreover, the consulted parents did not have a thorough understanding of the kindergarten care subsidy. While some had ‘heard of it’, all were unsure of how to apply for the subsidy and what kindergarten year it fitted.

Early childhood staff also felt that some parents were unclear about the purpose of preschool:

For a lot of parents, apart from having the annual general meeting at the end of the year when their child starts preschool, they don’t often know really what preschool is about.

Transitions
The role of parents in their child’s life undergoes ongoing change. There are however particular points and phases such as the transition from kindergarten to school and from primary to secondary school in which change is more predictable and therefore possibly easier to manage if everyone is prepared.

For children, these changes are often accompanied by transition programs in the respective institutions. Some kindergartens, for example, take the children to visit local primary schools and secondary school staff visit local primary schools. Parents are often offered information evenings at such transition points. However for those transitioning from primary to secondary school, staff reported attendance at these information sessions was often poor despite the best efforts of local primary schools:

Like we have a transition program for the students and again we had … we ran a session for parents on, you know, preparation for puberty and transition, and I think we had four parents come to it … and yeah, in the past, we’ve had outside speakers come as well and we’ve had to cancel them to because we could only get three or four people coming (Primary school staff member)
It should be noted that parents may also choose to not take up information on transitions because they have other priorities (see section on Parents’ prioritising other influences on their decisions, page 31).

Lacking comprehensive information, parents’ choice of a school for their child appears to be driven by a range of factors, not least convenience such as the closest school or the school they went to themselves. Some parents of a CALD background reported that they followed the trend set by other parents in their ethnic community, but stated that they would be willing to diverge from this preset path if more information on schools was available:

Now we only know each other, if one child goes to a school and the parent says it’s good, we all go to that school (Parent, focus group)

Parents who were searching information on primary schools found it difficult. Some suggested that leaflets similar to those published by secondary schools would be a useful format to outline school’s curriculum and second language options among others. This suggests that schools need to put more information out for parents of potential students. On the other hand some parents described the information generally published by secondary schools (e.g. on their websites) as promotional material that failed to provide the information they needed.

Some staff consulted maintained that the required information exists, but may require re-packaging into a format which encourages parents’ access and uptake.

For parents to become more engaged in school life, the information they seem to lack also concerns their role in relation to the ‘new’ institution their child is connected with and how this role and their engagement may change from before. Such information is important for them to be confident in their role as supporters of their child in the new environment. Some parents are, for example, very active at their child’s primary school and enjoy the recognition they receive from school staff, but the change to secondary school and what is perceived as a loss of interest in parents can then reduce the parent’s motivation to stay engaged in their child’s education (see also Parents’ information sources and channels, page 16).

### Alternative education pathways

The need for information about different educational pathways was rarely raised by parents, yet various staff clearly identified such a need in their practice of working with parents:

All schools … they sell their school on their VCE results … so they don’t want parents to know too much, that it’s out there, or if there is an alternative program such as VCAL. They don’t want to know that there are various VET programs that students can access at year 10 to keep them at school to have a little bit more experience and plus industry … industry, almost at times becomes a dirty word. (Community worker, secondary school)

When parents did mention the issue of alternative education pathways, they felt either their information needs were not met or they were being informed by the school at a too late a stage. This left them feeling hopeless, useless and alone.

Well that’s actually one thing that’s really relevant at the moment, because she wants to do year 10 but she doesn’t want to go to school anymore, so we did try to find information on other ways of getting her education and we came to a pretty much dead end trying to get anywhere. So that would interest me more, for people out there, for people who are struggling in the mainstream school, just if there was information on how they could still continue their education without being there (at school). (Parent, interview)

Parent experiences included frustration at discovering alternative options halfway through year 10 rather than in the latter stages of year 9; at the school’s inflexibility at not allowing different
learning arrangements (e.g. part time study for those students not suited to mainstream schooling); and at the lack of available print material and guidance from the school.

Parents’ role in their children’s development and education

An information gap that emerged only implicitly from the parents’ statements but explicitly from staff observations concerns awareness of the parents’ role in relation to their children’s development and education. Many parents did not seem to recognise the importance of their contribution alongside childhood and education professionals. Rather than seeing themselves as partners of professional child-care or education experts, there is a tendency for parents to expect those experts to ‘take over’ and just ‘inform’ them where necessary.

This expectation became evident in conversation with parents both of very young children and of secondary students. Indicative of this attitude is the lack of use by parents of the Child Health Record (‘Blue Book’) as a reference tool for their own information. Rather, many parents saw this book as a communication tool to be used between MCHN and GP. While MCHNs may expect parents to observe their child and report their concerns based on comparing their observations with the standards in the ‘Blue Book’, many parents expect the MCHN to pick up on problems and communicate those concerns—via the book—to other (medical) experts (see also section on Maternal and Child Health Nurse (MCHN) and Child Health Record, page 18).

Parents of school-aged children also lacked awareness of their crucial role in relation to their child’s education. Considering that parents are young people’s first and foremost resource for advice on education, training and career (see section on Role of parents in their children’s transitions, page 3), it is of concern that parents often did not recognise their responsibility as a trusted source of information for their children. In some cases this might mean they were not aware they could find out about the different curricula of secondary schools and assess them in view of the child’s interests and strengths. Instead, their choice of school might be merely pragmatic as in ‘the closest school’ or ‘the local school’. Or the choice might follow a group preference, as in the case of parents of an ethnic community who stated openly that they would consider other schools than that picked by everyone else in that community, if they had more information available.

Both at the level of services (childcare, school) and at the level of the department, priority needs to be given to positively encouraging parents to realise their potential as expert partners in their children’s care, development and education. This approach needs to recognise that some parents fear criticism from the institutions with which their children are connected.

Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and school-related costs

Some parents indicated that it was difficult to access information about the Education Maintenance Allowance; and that some information about costs for items such as excursions came too late to enable them to budget appropriately.

Information on school procedures and parents’ rights related to expulsions and suspensions

Parents who are informed of their child’s impending expulsion are often unaware of their rights in cases where the school applies procedures in response to a student’s misbehaviour or academic failure. The required information includes the grounds of expulsions and the number of suspensions that have to precede an expulsion. While such information has usually been accessible on the department’s website, its complexity made it very hard to access for parents.

Key findings on information needs and gaps

Parents require both more general and more specific information on their child’s development and schooling. For parents of younger children, information needs concern universal information on developmental milestones. Accessing services and understanding what they offer also presents as an information gap. Yet staff identified different gaps, most notably in understanding the
importance and various types of interactive play between parent and child. Parents of older children reported more specific information needs pertaining to their children, particularly about their progress at school and the options of alternative education pathways. According to staff, both sets of parents are also missing information on the role they can take in their child’s development and education. Many parents did not see themselves an important educational support compared with education professionals.

Parents’ information sources and channels

Parents seek information through various channels and from a variety of sources including persons as well as print and online media. Personal information sources mentioned by the research participants include:

- Maternal and Child Health Nurse (MCHN)
- playgroup facilitators
- community-based support agencies
- school-based community liaison officer
- GP or specialist (e.g. upon referral by MCHN)
- primary school teachers or principals
- teachers in parent–teacher interviews
- year-level coordinators
- community liaison worker at the school
- friends who are also parents
- community leaders
- their own children

Non-personal information sources mentioned by the research participants included:

- leaflets and brochures handed out by MCHN
- school newsletters
- TV
- Internet (websites, chat-rooms)

How parents choose their information sources and channels

Parents consulted through this research expressed a preference for personal information sources, although they also liked to be provided with information in writing for future reference and to prepare for face-to-face communication, for example with the MCHN or a teacher. Some of the parents with CALD backgrounds in the sample stated a preference for written information. This may be an indication of their reading skills being better developed than their listening and conversation skills.

Receiving information in person from a trusted source was the information channel with which many parents felt most comfortable. Feeling at ease with the information provider made parents feel confident asking for clarification and discussing the topic. This enabled them to absorb and understand the information more quickly.

It’s so different to just reading something, you really need that personal contact … you just don’t get it when you’re reading it from a book. You know you can read things till the cows come home, but someone can say one bit of advice, and it can just be the gem that you were looking for, just phrasing it in that different way. (Parent, interview)
However, the distribution of written material was also viewed positively when it was a ‘take home’ resource to reinforce earlier face-to-face discussions and to serve as an information guide when personal contact wasn’t available.

It’s like … I remember that conversation that we had. It’s exactly what we were talking about but I can’t remember that last detail, and you jog your memory just from relevant points (Parent, interview)

I prefer both, because what I’ve forgotten in the talk, I’ve actually still got written on paper, so I prefer both, save them on paper. (Parent, interview)

The Maternal Child and Health Nurse and schoolteachers emerged as the most common preferred information sources for parents of younger and older children respectively.

The MCHN was generally favoured due to communication being person to person. Additionally, parents appreciated the regularity and consistency of their child’s monitoring, with appointments affording them the time and opportunity for information to be reiterated and permeated. Moreover, these MCHN appointments as well as playgroups helped parents feel better connected to their community and both were a welcome source of support and advice.

Because it’s a regular….it’s a constant in their development (sic). I’m always seeing the health nurse about where they’re at and if I have any concerns. And Good Beginnings is another one because I’m there every week for playgroup. (Parent, interview)

As school is the main place of learning and development for older children, parents not surprisingly specified teachers as their primary information source. The channels most used for this were the bi-annual parent–teacher interviews or the school newsletter. Parents’ experience of these information sources and their relationship with teachers was in stark contrast to their experience with MCHN and playgroup facilitators. Not only were many of the consulted parents critical of teachers as their information source, their unhappiness extended to the information channels used by the school to communicate with them as well as their frequency:

Well I’ve only seen my daughter’s journal three times, I reckon, in the entire year, and that’s only if I have to sign something … so at least if there is a concern and they actually ring me, contact me, or send me a letter in the mail, I’m more likely to find out about it, than if it’s in a journal, because if it’s in a journal I’ll probably never see it. (Parent, interview)

As this comment suggests, parents’ preference for direct contact is also related to its reliability compared with other communication channels. Communication through the children was often not considered the most appropriate and effective channel, since children did not always pass on the messages to their parents.

**Trusting and respectful relationships in an accessible environment**

A good relationship with the person providing the information is vital for its successful take-up by the parent. This means that the information provider needs to treat the parent with openness and respect and that the parent needs to trust the information source. As an early childhood worker explained explained:

I think one of the roles of the teacher is to develop that trust relationship as well … Developing the confidence in parents supporting you is, I think, the hurdle that you’ve got to get over to actually get the engagement. (Early childhood worker, local government)

Parents are sometimes afraid of being judged by people whom they view as experts in education and child development matters, especially when they have had negative experiences with services
before, whether as parents or earlier as children. Parents need the certainty that the information source cares about their child and means the child well:

… but (the MCHN) is fantastic. She’ll you know accept a phone call at any time even if it’s after hours. Or if you can’t get a hold of her, she’ll contact you straight back. (Parent, interview)

Some staff felt that a focus on the child rather than the parent’s ‘(mal)functioning’ often proved more effective especially in reaching out to those marginalised parents who avoid contact with services:

It’s about supplying things to children in spite of or despite what their parents are participating in because they actually need it. And if the focus is on the children, invariably the parents feel like they’re in some kind of parity of partnership of care for that child, so they stop worrying about them and they’re able to make some focus on the child. (Early childhood worker, community sector)

Furthermore, parents need to feel personally addressed by the information provider. Otherwise they view the information as generic textbook information that is simply not relevant to their child and personal situation. This also means taking cultural and socioeconomic differences into account and presenting information in culturally sensitive and socially inclusive ways.

While parents do need expert information if their child is presenting a physical or mental health or behavioural concern, they also need a person who listens to them or who watches them interacting with their child:

Just not giving out information but maybe having a session with children. Actually seeing how the child is and how the parent deals with them and giving them advice on different ways (of parenting) to see if they can teach them. Not give them a piece of paper and say this is the way you do it … that takes money, that takes time, that takes people, but just actually working with the parent on how to change your parenting, I suppose, and coming up with other ways. (Parent, interview)

Parents’ experience with health professionals often leaves them feeling misunderstood, especially if they feel that their concern is not taken seriously or adequately responded to:

I think there needs to be more people you can talk to, who don’t have so much of the qualifications but who are willing to listen and observe mother and child or father and child or whoever (Parent, focus group)

Finally, the space and context in which the information provider operates matter, too. Playgroup sites tend to be perceived as easily accessible and non-threatening spaces. School staff, by contrast, appeared difficult to access for many parents, both by telephone and in person. Generally, parents seemed to experience more difficulty accessing sources of information as their children became older.

**Information sources from 0–18**

*Maternal and Child Health Nurse (MCHN) and Child Health Record*

Maternal and Child Health Nurses were often mentioned by research participants as a popular source of information for parents of young children. In Victoria, parents are connected to their local MCHN after their child’s birth and encouraged to attend appointments scheduled first at bi-weekly intervals, then at four months, six to eight months, one year, 18 months, two and three years).

When parents move either from another country or another state or area, they may fail to establish that connection with their local MCHN service. Professional staff also noted that some parents do not attend their scheduled appointments and thus miss out on important information. MCHNs tend
to have a busy schedule looking after more than 100 babies in their area and are often not able to follow on missed appointments to reach parents that have disengaged from the services. Outreach workers may be a more effective way of reaching out to those parents.

The information parents receive from their MCHN ranges from safety precautions to child development. Parents in the research sample generally appreciated the information they received during the MCHN appointments, both verbally and in writing (especially handouts). However, it appears that the Child Health Record is significantly under-used as a source of information on child development. They tended to see it as a source of information on their child’s physical growth rather than a reference to help them to observe their child’s development and identify areas of concern. Rather than as their own aid, they viewed the record as a means of communication on the child for other professionals, to be ‘fished out’ only for these instances:

I just put (the record) away and I’ve just fished it out now for his kinder enrolment, so I thought I better get it and try and find it. (Parent, focus group)

So if there is a problem, some parents would like the record to be the resource that spares them answering all the questions that professionals would otherwise ask them about their child:

If you go for a problem you’re not given, a million questions, it’s all there [in the Child Health Record], that’s what it’s suppose to be for anyway. (Parent, focus group)

**Playgroups**

Playgroups are usually weekly gatherings of parents with children of a similar age in a community location, sometimes at primary schools. While many playgroups are organised by parents, often born out of mothers’ groups, many playgroups are facilitated by community sector staff with expertise in child health and development. Those playgroups often play a vital role as information sources for parents.

The parents in this study perceive playgroups generally as non-threatening and non-stigmatised places where information is provided even without asking. While the parents’ primary motivation to attend may be to find respite through being in contact with other parents or benefiting from a distraction for their children, parents may learn about their child’s development and care and their own role in this context as well as about relevant services or events. Facilitated playgroups are particularly valuable because they can provide a ‘trusted environment’ for learning by doing and modelling rather than only theoretical advice.

Role modelling sometimes can be less threatening way of imparting that sort of knowledge and particularly for families that do have learning literacy issues, that role modelling is a good way for them to see—you know, that visual rather than relying on the written word. (Early childhood worker, local government)

However, some playgroup facilitators were perceived as intrusive by some parents:

I think in a way they can be a bit intrusive … like if you’re at playgroup and you’re just talking to the other mums and you mention ‘My son’s not sleeping’ … she will, you know, instead of just having a quick chat to you about it and that’s it, she’ll sort of sit you down for half an hour and give you a lecture on what you’re doing wrong and what you should be doing instead (Parent, focus group)

This shows that parent engagement needs to be handled with caution, as some parents tend to withdraw from the source of advice if they feel judged or threatened in their authority as parents or even worse, if they fear their children may be taken away. This can result in the parents and children most at risk disengaging from a low threshold source of support.
Community-based parent support

Among the most effective sources of information are places where parents can also access other forms of support for themselves as parents and their children. This means that information becomes part of a more comprehensive package of support provided by a trusted source and is thus also more likely to be taken up by the parent.

One example of such a place is the playgroups run by Good Beginnings in regional Victoria. Good Beginnings is a national charity that ‘works in partnership with communities to provide early childhood intervention services, that promotes children’s resilience and [that] engages in advocacy that builds the capacity of parents and carers’ (www.goodbeginnings.net.au). Their programs include child-focused community development programs as well as intensive family support programs and various universal supported groups.

One parent participant described Good Beginnings as ‘a lifeline for a lot of mums that keeps them going and keeps them sane’. The following lengthy statement by a regular playgroup participant demonstrates how she appreciated the combination of targeted support to specific vulnerable parent groups, a mainstream service for the children, personal support and universal information for parents:

I think if it wasn’t for them a lot of mums like me would probably be isolated, alone, and severely depressed. I like the way that they focus on many, many groups. They focus on different nationalities. They also focus on young mums. They focus on mums that are suffering depression. And they try to help all mothers and all children to socialise, to be around other mothers that are similar. For kids to be around and have contact with other children. And they’re always there if you just want to cry to them or talk to them … They’ve always got heaps of information. If you ask, they normally, if they don’t know, will find it for you. (Parent, interview)

Childcare centres

Some of the parents in the research sample who had their children in long day care mentioned the child-care staff as a source of information. In most cases this was for specific information on the child, such as feedback on the child’s wellbeing as well as learning, interests and developmental progress. According to the accreditation model for child-care workers, the worker needs to share the objectives they set for the child as well as the child’s progress in relation those objectives. One parent described such information sessions:

They have catch-up times where, a couple of times a year, they’ll sit down with us and talk to us about where our child is at. Talk about whether they’re ready to move up to the next room. I think that is great. But there’s a lot of parents and a lot of kids, and you can’t really spend an hour chatting to them, but they’re a lot more open to talking and discussing what your child’s needs are. (Parent, interview)

Some childcare centres give information relating to kindergarten or prep, for example about enrolment deadlines. However it seems that many parents do not get this kind of information from the child-care centre and are unsure where to access it.

Friends with children

All parents mentioned the exchange with their friends, especially other mothers, as a source of information, which they used all the time as part of their everyday lives. These private networks do not seem to be perceived as authoritative information sources, but they help parents to make up their mind about certain bits of information and knowledge regarding their child’s development and education:

I probably get the most helpful information from face-to-face, natural interactions with other parents. Probably the real issues come up in a more natural setting than they do in a formal setting. (Parent, interview)
‘Discussing things with my peers and other mothers’ (Parent interview) would be the preferred information source for some parents.

**GPs and specialist doctors**

GPs and specialist doctors are another source of information, usually when parents perceive their child to be sick. MCHNs refer parents to medical professionals when they perceive developmental delays or health issues that need specialist checking or treatment. However, parents who mentioned this information source did not seem to consider GPs or specialists as a preferred source, due to the limited time and listening offered in usual consultations.

**School newsletters**

Both primary school and secondary schools send out newsletters to parents. Among the schools addressed in this research, most seemed to disseminate them electronically with some providing parents with a print-out upon request. Newsletters usually cover school events, important upcoming dates in the school calendar, students’ sport achievements, sometimes also available support such as the EMA. Most parents in the research said they looked at the newsletters most of the time if they could access them.

**Parent–teacher interviews**

Parent–teacher communication is a fundamental outlet for the provision and promotion of information. The common format is parent–teacher interviews which tend to be held twice a year as well as when a problem arises that needs discussion with a parent, such as behavioural problems or lacking progress. Many parents consulted in this research expressed anger or frustration with the limitation of the communication from the school to emergencies and the delay in the school contacting them in the case of their child’s lacking academic progress (see also section on Barriers experienced by parents of secondary school children, page 27).

A secondary school staff member interviewed for this research described the process by which the school assesses that the child ‘has not done enough to complete’ a particular year level:

> Usually we’re coming to that sort of stage at November … so usually about now we have a good idea of whether a student is ready to move to the next level. And usually if we think that a student because of their attitude, their confidence, has not done enough to complete that particular year level, we’ll contact the parent and have a meeting, and say ‘Look, it’s not working out this year, maybe your child should consider repeating this year or maybe school’s not right for them, maybe they should consider going to TAFE’. In other words part of the discussion is about career planning and so on. (Secondary school staff member)

Parents reported they were often unaware of the possibility of expulsion on academic grounds till it is too late. The parent–teacher interview in the case of impending failure is clearly an insufficient channel to keep parents adequately informed.

**Parent liaison worker**

At present parent liaison workers seem to be an information source many parents wish for because they struggle to establish communication with teachers or other school staff to discuss their child’s issues or progress. Where such a position exists, parents said they were highly appreciative of the possibility of approaching somebody who is based at the school and has good contacts with the teachers but is not a teacher, when there are problems related to the child or a teacher they wish to discuss. Beyond liaising between parents and teachers, the parent liaison worker provides useful information to the parents and tries to engage them in school-based activities.
School reports
Reports tend to be provided several times a year, for example two interim reports and two comprehensive reports. While school reports are a universal source of information for parents, parents in the research sample hardly mentioned them as a source of information on their child’s progress and development.

Student journals
A few parents mentioned student journals as a parent–teacher communication channel that has the potential of providing ongoing information to parents. The value of the journal depends on two principal factors outside the parent’s control: its use by the teacher and its transfer to the parent by the student. Ideally teachers use the journal to inform parents about their child’s ongoing academic progress or lack thereof.

Practice shows however that these two factors will often hinder the usefulness of the journal: teachers may barely use the journal to update parents on their child’s progress and development and students fail to pass the journal on to their parents.

Special information events at school
Information events for parents tend to take place especially around the transition from primary to secondary school and in the senior years of secondary school. In one school in the research sample, there were information nights at the start of every year level before students choose their subjects. There the parents receive information about possible pathways open to their child, with speakers from inside and outside the school. These group sessions are followed by individual counselling, where the parents meet a panel of career advisors and year-level coordinators who can advise on subject selections based on specific employment interests.

While parents need information regarding the transition years, the very delivery of this information can often prevent parents from engaging with it. While their children are offered hands-on transition programs, parents are often inundated with information pamphlets and seminars. This method of delivery can prove uncomfortable for some parents, especially for those who rarely engage with an educational institution and who already feel overloaded with print material. Some staff were conscious of this:

We bus the kinder kids up to our school … so they get to come and have a look and see what a big school is like. And we whip the parents off down to a room and we usually throw all sorts of information at them. (Primary school staff member)

Internet
An abundance of websites and online chat-rooms addresses parents, information needs, particularly relating to young children. Furthermore, every school has its own website and electronic mail-outs. The kind of online information parents in the research sample mentioned included parent forums (e.g. on health issues) and children-related product information (e.g. on car seats).

While internet access is known to be less widespread among low-income families, many parents in the research sample appeared to have internet access, even if not in their home (e.g. in the housing estate). Especially for single parents without support who tend to be more housebound, the internet can provide a convenient information channel in terms of out-of-hours accessibility. However despite being a popular source and channel of information for some parents, many still experience problems in navigating websites (see section on Limited computer literacy, page 25).

Key findings on information sources and channels
Parents’ information sources include services such as Maternal and Child Health Nurses, community support sites, teachers and other school staff, as well as friends. Most written
information comes from school newsletters, student journals and for some parents the internet. Parents show a clear preference for personal information sources, ideally in combination with written material for future reference or preparation for meetings with professionals. Parents’ preferred information channels are face-to-face meetings with MCHN for parents of pre-school children and with teachers for parents of older children. The research suggests that the following information channels are particularly effective: facilitated playgroups (either community-based or school-based), community support services, school-based community liaison workers and information nights at school. The information channels which staff and parents in this study tend to find less effective include the Child Health Record (not understood as an information resource on child development for parents), parent–teacher interviews (too infrequent to keep parents up to date), student journals (under-used), health professionals (lacking in supportive relationship).

**Barriers to information**

Different barriers pertain to information *seeking*, information *finding* and *understanding*. While the barriers in seeking information are mainly parent-related (individual barriers), barriers in finding and understanding information are related to both the parents and the physical and cognitive accessibility of the information (structural barriers). While much of the literature on parental engagement focuses on barriers in the sphere of parents, it is vital to recognise the role of structural barriers in the communication process.

Parent-related barriers that emerged in this research include low income, location, low social capital3, low education levels, low literacy including computer literacy, low English-language proficiency, different cultural understandings, lack of interest in their child’s academic progress, negative attitudes towards schools based on own schooling history, and history of low or difficult engagement with services (sometimes related to one or more of the previously noted barriers):

> I think it’s that fear factor that you get involved with an institution. Perhaps they’ve had not such great experiences with education when they were at school, it wasn’t a great experience for them, or they’ve had issues with the department and they just don’t want people questioning—and you can understand that (Early childhood worker, local government)

Information-related or structural barriers revealed by this research include physical inaccessibility of information (e.g. information only available electronically, information not passed on to parents by their children), psychological obstacles (e.g. teachers not welcoming to parents), unsuitable presentation format (e.g. the Child Health Record was not recognised as an information resource because of its presentation), language of information.

It is vital to note that parents often experience a number of interrelated barriers rather than a single one. Low income is, for example, a central source of difficulties faced by many parents; but it tends to be a combination of factors that renders parents’ access to and engagement with information difficult. Low income may be accompanied by irregular working hours or time poverty, low education levels and a history of low engagement with services and institutions related to the children. The last may in turn be linked to a number of information-related barriers.

The notion of social exclusion is an attempt to capture ‘what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown’ (Burchardt 2000, p.388). It is helpful to understand the interconnectedness of barriers that socioeconomically

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3 Social capital describes connections within and between networks of people but also between individuals. Putnam (2000) distinguishes between bonding capital (between socially homogenous groups) and bridging capital (between socially heterogeneous groups), with the latter being considered as particularly valuable for society as a whole.
disadvantaged parents are facing, but without focusing on the ‘malfunctioning’ parent rather than the structural causes of disadvantage (Gillies 2005). As one early childhood worker commented:

And for a lot of these disadvantaged schools sometimes that might be a housing issue or a domestic violence issue, or something like that. It’s the fact that whatever the parent’s identifying they’re able to be supported to find … And that may not be an educational issue to start off with, and I think that in disadvantaged areas that’s the key thing, and then once the trust is established over time you can start working on the educational. (Early childhood worker, local government)

**Barriers shared by parents of younger and older children**

Some information barriers confirmed by this research affect parents of children across the age-groups from early years to secondary school:

**Low income**

Low income affects parents’ access to information, for example by limiting their access to transport to reach services and thereby information or by limiting their access to communication, be it through the internet (lack of computer or internet access) or by telephone (lack of phone credit). A worker noted:

A lack of home phones to make calls or inquiries. You know people don’t often have phones or [for] their mobile they haven’t got enough money to have their card updated, so sometimes those sorts of things in terms of connecting, communicating, are barriers as well. (Early childhood worker, local government)

**Time poverty**

Due to work and family commitments, parents said they often lacked the necessary time to source and read information. Working parents are hence at a disadvantage in engaging with information, compared with those who can afford and choose to stay at home with their children:

It’s not just about inviting parents in for milk and fruit but how do we actually get them in … So that’s a new process that we’re just engaging in as well. And I suspect a lot of preschools would have the same sorts of difficulties. Well maybe not so much in the wealthy eastern suburbs where you’ve got perhaps more parents who maybe aren’t at work. But a lot of our parents of course are at work as well. Now that’s another barrier to learning. (Early childhood worker, local government)

**Irregular or unpredictable work hours**

Due to their work schedule, some parents found it difficult to access the staff that could provide them with information in relation to their child.

**Time poverty of childcare staff due to lack of resources**

Staff in institutional childcare often lack the time to discuss the child’s development individually with parents. The parents’ contact with the staff is confined to dropping their children off and picking them up at the end of the day.

**Discomfort in accessing services**

Many socioeconomically disadvantaged parents do not feel comfortable to address staff in services because they fear being judged or feeling intimidated or even worse, having their children taken away from them. They often lack established, trusting relationships with the staff:

So there might be three or four community development activities on and they find something they are comfortable with. And then through that point of contact, then a whole lot of information and links are made. But the first step is always for them to feel welcome and that whatever is happening with them or their child is going to be OK … and a lot of
the stigma that parents have about ‘Oh, you know, my child might be considered naughty or is not … you know, just not well behaved, so I can’t take them anywhere’. (Early childhood worker, local government)

Low self-esteem is a significant barrier which may be related to parents’ educational background or employment status or any other aspect of their lives. It leads to the paradoxical situation that parents may even fear embarrassing their children and therefore not attend an event from which their children might benefit:

That’s another huge barrier … for a lot of parents. You know, oh I’m not worthy. I couldn’t go there. And I don’t want to look foolish in front of my child. Or I don’t want my child to feel embarrassed for me. You know, parents with low self-esteem. (Early childhood worker, local government)

Lack of English language skills and literacy
Parents sometimes lack the necessary language skills to ask for information they may need or to understand the information they receive, especially written information in English. And many universal services are not equipped to respond to the information needs of people with a non-English speaking language background:

Another disadvantage might be that their English is a second language or they don’t speak any English at all, or they don’t have a written language of their own, never mind English. That’s a very difficult issue for a lot of families when they’re coming here because everything is written down. (Early childhood worker, community sector)

Limited computer literacy
While the internet is generally considered to be a quick, effective method of retrieving information, parents who consider themselves to be computer novices and who are also time-poor are often deterred from using it. However they do continue to access and use the internet despite these perceived barriers:

I’m not the best at it. My skills aren’t up to date and sometimes using the internet takes me an hour to find one little thing, probably ‘cos I’m not good at figuring out what key words need to be typed in and stuff … if I could use it in a way that was quick and easy … if I had a lot of time it would be cool, but I don’t have a lot of time. (Parent, interview)

Parents found the language and context of certain web pages confusing, and links to further information or a different site were often disjointed.

And you get … even sites that have the links and everything, so just join … ‘Cos the link to the site, it takes you to the beginning of the site so the information they’re talking about, you actually have to burrow for, and a lot of people don’t know that so they look at a site and ‘Huh, what you talking about? ... You know you just need something that’s basically like ABC, you know—like literally laid out in black and white. (Parent, interview)

Moreover, some parents were suspicious of brand-sponsored websites either due to a concern that they might receive false information from parents posing as childcare professionals in chat rooms or that the website information might promote the brand rather than provide objective information.

There’s sites with information but they’re all brand-orientated. It’s very biased information. It’s all marketing. It’s all information wrapped in a tasty morsel, not the information. (Parent, interview)

It needs mentioning though that even a professional working in the education field observed that some resources aimed at parents, such as the department’s website, are actually very complicated to
navigate. It should also be noted that a significant proportion of very low income families do not have access to a computer or internet at home (Bond & Horn 2008)

Domestic violence and other family issues
Some parents experience problems at home that impact negatively on their engagement with their children’s care, education and development.

Housing instability
Some parents experience temporarily homelessness, for example due to domestic violence. This renders their engagement with their children’s education difficult at a time where the children need particular support.

Emma had been through a lot. My father’s passed away. You know we’ve been through domestic violence, something shocking. We were homeless. We had a lot going on. And that’s why the social worker [at Emma’s school] became really involved. (Parent, interview)

Cultural difference
Understandings of children’s developmental and educational needs and how those are addressed by different social institutions (family, childcare centre, kindergarten) are culturally specific. Parents from other cultural backgrounds are often unfamiliar with and even alienated by Australian approaches to children’s care, development and education.

Lacking familiarity with service systems
Parents who have recently migrated and fled to Australia often do not know how to navigate the different services, such as for those with young children.

We have families coming in here with Centrelink update forms and Domino Pizza flyers, they both mean the same thing to them. That’s where we’re at with a lot of families … that’s our starting point. That they don’t understand what’s going on in their mailbox. So unless there’s places like a resource centre like this or a really good concierge at the bottom of the flats or a neighbour or something, lots of things parents miss out on in the early years. (Early childhood worker, community sector)

Lacking interest in monitoring the child’s educational progress
Information may be accessible but not taken up because the parents lack interest in communication from their child’s school such as school reports.

Usually parents who are on the ball have a good idea. But we still get the odd occasion where parents say ‘I didn’t know anything about this and I’m shocked’, and that’s a bit of an embarrassment for the school if that happens, because really it should never happen. But to be honest, in a small number of cases it does happen. Yeah it may be partly the school’s fault, but it may be partly too that the parents haven’t had enough interest in monitoring their child during the year. (Secondary school staff member)

This statement also shows that parents need to make an effort to be and stay informed.

Barriers experienced by parents of young children
In addition to the general barriers, individual and structural information barriers experienced by parents of young children included:

Child Health Record not used and promoted as a resource for parents
The way that early childhood staff presented the Child Health Record to parents often failed to communicate that parents should use it as a information source to monitor their child’s
development and identify areas of concern. Different MCHNs tend to use the ‘Blue Book’ very differently, and some parents felt that it was not kept up to date or ‘not filled in properly’. If parents have the impression that the book is not being used adequately by professionals, they are even less likely to make use of the resource themselves.

I’ve noticed up here they do a lot better than what they did in the city, ‘cos with my other two they didn’t fill it in properly and they would miss pages and stuff. But since I’ve been up here, they’ve been using every single page and doing it properly. (Parent, focus group)

**Child Health Record not understood and used as a resource by parents**
Even when told about the purpose of the Child Health Record, some parents failed to use it purposefully.

Mums don’t often realise or take a lot of interest in the book, because it’s just something that actually records measurement and weight and you know to talk to mother-in-law about and mum about, rather than looking at the content about the development of the child. Even though they’re interested in that but them actually taking ownership of the book and writing in it or doing things, they often don’t do that. (Early childhood worker, local government)

**Lack of information on how to access free kindergarten**
Staff reported that many parents were unaware of their children’s right to 15 hours of free kindergarten and how they could access kindergarten:

And they’re not in a kinder program even though the government says, 15 hours a week of free kinder for everybody. That’s great, but that doesn’t mean everyone will get it and it doesn’t mean it will work for everyone, because people don’t know how to access it. They don’t know how to get to the point where their children can do that stuff. (Early childhood worker, community sector)

**Childcare staff making parents feel unwelcome**
Staff in childcare places are often from a more privileged background than the more disadvantaged parents and may lack an understanding of the issues those parents are facing. They may make those parents not always feel welcome. If parents already feel insecure in addressing services, this certainly does not help their communication with staff.

A lot of these places just don’ t welcome some families. Like some families don’t feel welcome. And again it goes back to a lot of our teachers and things are white middle class and I’d say the same thing, and they have their values, and that makes it very challenging for some families to be able to access these services because they just don’t feel comfortable. (Early childhood worker, local government)

**Barriers experienced by parents of secondary school children**
In addition to the general barriers parents of secondary school children may also experience the following barriers:

**Lack of school resources for prompt contact with parents**
Parents consulted said they were often only contacted by the school after problems emerged. They often experienced shock and disbelief when the school eventually informed them about their child’s lack of progress:

They’re telling me now. I don’t get a note sent home. Nobody lets me know. Nobody notifies me. So she failed one of the major subjects because she didn’t take a textbook. Somebody had pinched it out of her locker. So she didn’t have a textbook, and that’s after three terms, I get told that. Not good enough. Not good enough. (Parent, focus group)
Despite different information channels such as newsletters and parent–teacher interviews, many parents felt as though they received little information or feedback during the school year.

I’d really like more feedback from teachers but I find that even if I ring, I invariably get put though to voicemail and then if I’m lucky I may get a reply back within a week. (Parent, focus group)

Schools’ lack of resources to respond to parents’ inquiries was also confirmed by a community-sector based education development worker whose work involved a lot of communication with schools:

Some parents want to know immediately what’s going on with their child and it can be difficult for them to get that information from the school because schools are so busy. They don’t always have time to return phone calls … Time is the biggest barrier with the teachers. They have way too many students, they are overworked. It’s not that they don’t care about individual students, it’s just too difficult. (Secondary School, community sector)

Lack of one key parent contact person at school
Parents’ key contact is often the year-level coordinator. If that person is busy, parents often do not know who else to address. Or they may get different kinds of information from different teachers. What parents require, however, is one key contact person with an overview of their child’s progress.

Lack of school resources for mail-outs of information
Many schools tend to use mainly electronic media to disseminate information to parents. Some parents, however, do not have access to computers or the internet, and some are computer illiterate.

You’re lucky if you get a newsletter once a month, and now I think they only do it once a month but you can’t [read it], unless you go online and print it out. I don’t have a computer, so I can’t print it out, I can’t go in and get it. And they don’t even have a copy in the office which you can go and pinch … (Parent, focus group)

Schools making parents feel unwelcome
Parents often do not feel welcome at school. They feel that secondary schools do not want much contact with them. This impression may be based on teachers’ failure to return their calls or on the limited number of interactions usually scheduled for parent–teacher contact within one school year. Additionally, from the experience of receiving information on their child’s unsatisfactory progress only when it is too late to act upon this information as a parent, parents feel undervalued as the school’s partners in their child’s education. Some staff confirmed that parents of low socioeconomic backgrounds might be judged by staff in schools and labelled as ‘difficult’, which translated into their experience of feeling unwelcome at school.

Schools are often staffed by middle class people who have never felt what it felt like to be in that situation and they don’t know how to communicate with them effectively. (Community worker, secondary school)

Low self-confidence due to limited education and negative schooling history
Socioeconomic disadvantage is often, though not always, connected to low education levels. Low education levels are also often associated with negative education experiences which are likely to influence attitudes towards schools; and limited education may make it hard for parents to understand information provided by schools:

Low socioeconomic families have placed maybe different levels on the value on education. Maybe they have not gone through a lot of school themselves and perhaps their schooling
was not a good time for them. So they remember some of that when they approach schools. So schools can become almost like the enemy. (Community worker, secondary school)

Reliance on children to pass on information addressed to their parents
Parents said they often did not receive the information sent through their children. Some felt that children should not be assumed to be responsible enough to act as a messenger:

I think they rely a lot on the students actually coming home and giving us information and they don’t and I only found out … my daughter’s (paper) for me for the year 9, choosing her electives and what it was going to be like, I know ’cos another parent told me ’cos her son is also in year 9 and we’re friends and she said ‘Dah dah, the meeting…..’ and I went ‘What meeting?’ (Parent, focus group)

Children’s reluctance to involve parents in their education
During secondary school, the relationships between students and their parents are changing and parents often experienced their child’s refusal to communicate on school matters. Some parents were rather unprepared through the transition from primary school to secondary school and struggle with their changed role in their child’s education:

That’s the other thing you’re sort of battling against, because, yeah, who wants mum around when you’re 15 down at the school? (Community worker, secondary school)

Confusing language in messages addressed to parents
Some parents did not understand the terminology used by schools and failed to understand certain messages. This led them to rely on indirect, anecdotal information or to decide it was too hard to be involved.

There’s no commonality with the language across the board. Things are misinterpreted. Things are misinferred. You know it’s confusing. And often a lot of parents throw their hands up in the air and think I don’t know, the school must know. (Community worker, secondary school)

Key findings on barriers to information
Parents of low socioeconomic backgrounds are facing a range of barriers to seeking, finding and understanding information. Often they experience a combination of related barriers, some of which relate to personal circumstances (e.g. low education, low income, low literacy, negative history of schooling, time poverty, poor health, housing insecurity, family-related problems), and some to structural barriers (e.g. difficult access to information, inefficient information channels, unwelcoming information sources, level of language).

Barriers experienced by parents across all age groups include the difficulty of accessing transport to information sources such as services and communication media (internet, telephone) due to low income, time poverty due to working hours and lack of support, discomfort in accessing services, low literacy levels and lacking familiarity with service systems. Many parents of younger children are also failing to understand and take up the information provided by the Child Health Record. Parents of school-aged children also experience the time poverty of teachers as a barrier, as well as their own attitude towards schools and teachers, their children’s reluctance to involve their parents and the lack of consistent information from school.

Barriers to acting upon information
Many of the individual and structural barriers noted above also impact on parents’ ability and readiness to act upon information. Low income and low education are, for example, key barriers that may keep socially excluded parents from following up on the information available to them. Because of the hours and inflexibility that an unskilled or low-skilled job usually brings, parents
may not be able to engage with their child’s educational progress and their school as much as they
are encouraged to and as much as they may wish to. Because of their limited literacy, parents may
not understand more complicated information material distributed by the school.

A crucial additional parameter of parents’ action or inaction is, however, their self-understanding in
relation to their children’s care, education and development. Within the range of possible
perspectives, two extreme positions tend to prevent parents from acting on the information they
receive. On the one hand some parents view themselves as the superior expert on their child’s
needs, and this may prevent them from taking up information which they consider too general or
not relevant for their specific child. On the other hand, other parents of school-aged children may
assume the school’s exclusive expertise and responsibility for their child’s learning and
development, even when children ask them questions about education or career.

Among some parents in the research group, the first extreme tended to emerge especially in parents
of young children, while the second extreme was more prevalent among parents of older children.
In both cases, the ideal scenario of parents as partners of childhood or education professionals in
their children’s development and education is far removed from the reality of the parent.

Parents not recognising the role of other experts / teachers
Some parents choose to reject or ignore certain kinds of information from other sources, because
they trust their own judgment more on their child’s wellbeing and development:

  I think, a lot of the time, because the information is all from textbooks and every kid’s
different, sometimes what you get given on a handout won’t apply to your child ’cos
you’ve tried it and it hasn’t worked. (Parent, focus group)

Parents who have already had one or two children, often lack the time to seek information.
However they also tend to trust their experience with the older children and are less disposed to
seek or act upon up-to-date information, especially in relation to their pre-school children.

  I think that when you first have a child or the fear is there, you feel the formal settings
make you feel like you can find the right answer, but as you get more comfortable with
your parenting skills and the children that you don’t need the formal settings anymore if
you’re confident. You find other ways to explore yourself in the children that are less
formal and more natural. (Parent, interview)

Parents may trust their own judgement also based on their own experience of being parented and
their conclusion of ‘having turned out fine’ themselves. Thus, parents of younger children may
consider physical discipline the only successful strategy at certain times, although they know
that it is not recommended:

  I’m happy to speak about it, I don’t know if people disagree with me, but I’ve grown up
with slaps on the bum if I’ve been naughty. (Parent, focus group)

Another example of trusting their personal experience is parents’ attitude towards schooling. Many
parents who received low support for their own schooling and have limited education are not
overly supportive of their own children’s education.

Parents are aware of certain choices they can make in their parenting and see the choice they make as
their right to do it ‘their way’. For example, a parent may know that play is considered an important
form of interaction with the child, but chooses not to play because it makes them ‘feel stupid’.
Parents not recognising their own role as their child’s teacher

As mentioned earlier, there is a gap in parents’ awareness of their role as their child’s first teachers and partners of different development and education experts. This constitutes a barrier to parents’ take-up of information related to their children’s development and learning.

Often parents do think that they’re passing over the child to have learning done, forgetting or not even knowing that the parenting that they’ve done from the time their baby was born, the child has been learning all the time but they haven’t known that. (Early childhood worker, local government)

Partly parents’ lack of recognition of their own role alongside schools comes from a deliberate rejection of responsibility for that part of their children’s lives.

‘I send them to school to learn, educate, you know that’s your role’, so that attitude exists as well. (Early childhood worker, local government)

The perception of parents by experts such as preschool or school teachers’ may also contribute to that division of labour and parents’ discomfort in taking on a more responsible role. For parents who already feel hesitant, it does not help their self-confidence as parents if teachers do not recognise the parents’ role. One of the interviewed community stakeholders commented on the importance of teachers’ understanding of parental expertise alongside their own.

One of the big things is…and I think this is a barrier, that parents often feel very intimidated. OK you’re the expert, you’re the teacher, you know and for some teachers they keep that little bit of a distance because I am the expert. And we’re trying to get the teachers to think more about you know the parents, the first teacher. You’re the second teacher who’s going to facilitate the learning with the parent, and maybe the environment is the third teacher, so we’re all working collaboratively to engage the learning outcomes. (Early childhood worker, local government)

Parents’ expectations of information value

Another barrier to taking up information seems to be related to parents’ expectation of the value of the information. For example, they may have found that following child-rearing recommendations about settling children or managing tantrums has worked with one child but not another. This makes some parents distrust the information and they decide to follow their own path.

Parent 1: I’ve found with the information that I’m given it’s worked on one of my kids but it hasn’t worked on another, you can give me all the advice in the world but it’s not going to. Parent 2: It just depends on the child (Parents, focus group)

Some parents realise there are limitations to the effectiveness of parenting advice, so they use certain information ‘as a guideline’ rather than as an instruction manual to parenting.

You can’t just give out a sheet and say this is the way to do deal with it, and that’s magic (Parent, focus group)

These limitations may need to be made clear alongside recommendations that are disseminated to parents, so that variable results do not lead to parents rejecting information and advice from external sources altogether.

Parents’ prioritising other influences on their decisions

In some cases schools make information available to parents, for example through curriculum information nights for parents of children in Year 6. However parents may choose not to take the information up and base their decisions on other factors.
For example regarding choice of secondary school, parents often do not access or take up the information offered by different schools on their facilities and transition process. Rather, they may base their choice of school mainly where the majority of other families are sending their children.

I think most parents choose the school that their kids go to based on where their kids friends are going. I don’t know if they often know that much about it. Particularly down here on the Peninsula, all the kids that go to Rosebud Primary School go to Rosebud Secondary. It’s just what they do, whether their parents know about it or not. (Community worker, secondary school)

Key findings on barriers to acting upon information

Some information is accessible to parents, yet they may fail to take it up for various reasons. Firstly, parents may not recognise the value of professional knowledge of workers in the child development or education field and trust their own judgment better. Secondly, the opposite scenario is when parents fail to recognise their own expertise and put all responsibility for their child’s wellbeing and development onto the early childhood expert or teacher. Thirdly, parents may expect too much of the information provided to them and react adversely to information if they have been disappointed by the usefulness of previous information. Fourthly, some parents make decisions based on reasons, motivations or information different from formal sources.

All of these barriers are strongly related to parents’ self-confidence and understanding of their role in their children’s education and development in relation to staff in early childhood and educational institutions.

Parental engagement: gaps and opportunities

Understandings of parental engagement and parent–school communications vary among staff and parents. This pertains not only to the level of engagement that is deemed appropriate but also to the approach to engaging parents, from a direct focus on parents (e.g. in parent conferences) to a focus on the children as the best messengers to their parents. The latter derives from the understanding that parental engagement should not focus on changing the parent, but on achieving something for the child:

It is about supplying things to children in spite of what their parents are participating in because they actually need it. And if the focus is on the children, invariably the parents in my experience feel like they’re some kind of parity of partnership of care for that child, so they stop worrying about them and they’re able to make some focus on the child … And then we say ‘Do you want to stay and have lunch because actually it’s really nice, she’s been talking about you’, so you talk to the parents via the children and then the parents come in and sit down in the yard and go ‘Oh yeah, it’s really nice here. Yeah I’ll have a bit of food, OK’. (Early childhood worker, community sector)

As far as the minimum desirable level of engagement is concerned, interviewees tended to name parents’ attendance of parent–teacher interviews and information nights at school. Some staff added to this minimum level an interest in their child’s learning and participation in more events the school offers to parents.

Research participants’ assessments of the lack of parental engagement differed for different age groups of the children. In the early years, staff tended to identify the issue of parents not being adequately engaged as the most important problem, while in the secondary school years the principal issue identified was a failure by schools to adequately engage with parents.

There are two issues which are vital in relation to engaging highly disadvantaged parents. One is the importance of trust as the basis of successful communication. Parents pay attention to the information that comes from ‘trusted sources’, people whom they feel have their best interests at heart and to whom they can easily relate. The trusted sources vary from community to community
but they can usually be identified by local services and schools. It may, for example, be a playgroup that parents attend, or it may be ethnic community leaders.

It doesn’t matter how much information is out there. The message coming from the sort of opinion leaders and respected folk needs to be right. (Early childhood worker, community sector)

The second is the need for guidance and support in addition to the provision of information: simply telling is often not enough. Disadvantaged parents who may have had negative experiences with services in the past often need one-to-one support in learning to navigate services. While this kind of support may seem expensive, it is highly effective in empowering parents to act responsibly and independently in the long term.

When you’re talking about families that come from disadvantaged low socioeconomic groups, high density public housing, newly arrived, when you’re talking about those kinds of families, they need someone to navigate systems with them. Only once or twice or three times, then they can do it themselves. So the investment is actually walking the walk and doing the tour until they can do it themselves, and then they will. (Early childhood worker, community sector)

A similar argument can be made in relation to parents of school-aged children who are disengaging from school. As an education development worker described it:

Parents feel very disempowered when children start to disengage from school. They refuse to attend, they wag weeks on end or plainly refuse to leave the house. And there is no truancy officers, there is no liaison officer [parents] can talk to. There is really nothing to make kids or parents involved in education. (Community worker, secondary school)

A final difference in the assessment of parental engagement by staff consulted in this research pertained to the allocation of responsibility. While some saw parental engagement as a two-way process that requires parents as well as schools to get active, others considered schools the sole responsible party. A clash of interpretations between schools and parents seems to be at the heart of the issue of parental engagement. The following two quotes, the first from a school, and the second from the community sector, illustrate different perspectives on this matter:

There are four reports we provide. There are parent–teacher nights and there’s always a chance if the parent has a suspicion that there’s a problem, they can always pick up the phone and ring the school and we would have a meeting, and we do. Some parents are busy or otherwise occupied and they don’t know their kids as well as they might. (Secondary school staff member)

[The problem is] the lack of a support structure in place for families and for schools for dealing with difficulties. And it causes sides, the parents think the school’s to blame, the school thinks the parents are to blame. And there should be somebody above who says: ‘No, it’s not the school’s fault. It’s the law’. (Community worker, secondary school)

**Key findings on parental engagement**

Parents on the one hand and schools and services on the other hand often hold different understandings of the adequate level of, approach to and responsibility for parental engagement. One effective approach to parental engagement is to focus on the children rather than parents. This is based on the belief that a shared interest in the child’s progress and development is the stronger incentive for parental involvement than the parent’s learning as such. Early childhood staff tended to identify the issue of parents not being adequately engaged as the most important problem, while the principal issue identified in the secondary school years is a failure by schools to adequately engage with parents.
Engaging highly disadvantaged parents ideally occurs through trusted sources, which vary from site to site. Examples are community-based playgroups or ethnic community leaders. Secondly, the provision of information is ideally combined with the offer of support or maintenance.

6 Case study of a parent

Sandra\(^4\) is a single mother of three children who faces multiple levels of disadvantage. She was the victim of domestic violence and she continues to experience housing instability. Her youngest child, Emma, suffers with a chronic medical condition which has added extra financial and emotional strain to their lives. Sandra speaks of her daughter as ‘bright’, ‘very smart’ and ‘very intelligent, someone who would manage well academically if there weren’t other issues going on.’

Sandra’s communication with school in relation to her two older children was fine but she has struggled for some time now to engage and communicate with Emma’s school. When Sandra informed the school nurse of her daughter’s medical condition she was told that all relevant teachers would be notified. However the information was not passed on, which led to embarrassing incidents for her daughter and an assumption of bad behaviour by the uninformed teachers. Besides, the nurse mistrusted the validity of Emma’s medical condition despite the provided hospital documents. To Sandra’s and Emma’s disappointment, the school’s social worker left unexpectedly and was not replaced, which left Emma without support at the school.

Emma struggled to complete Year 8 and her attendance rate was poor. It turned out that the class teacher was unaware of Emma’s absence on several occasions. On two occasions Sandra contacted the school regarding her daughter’s progress but was given no information in return. Instead, the school contacted her at a later date regarding Emma’s behaviour in class. It was at this point that Sandra was informed of her daughter falling behind significantly and failing compulsory subjects. During this period, Sandra and her daughter experienced domestic violence, Sandra was sick and had to stay in hospital for a while, and they became homeless once more. Upon referral by the region’s Youth and Family Services, Sandra and Emma were assigned an Education Development Worker to facilitate the relationship between Sandra and the school and secure the family temporary housing.

The meetings at school in which the Education Development Worker came along with Sandra made very clear that the school staff treated the community worker with considerably more respect than the parent. Furthermore it showed gaps in school internal communication about Emma’s performance. Given Emma’s increasing reluctance to go to school and with the community worker’s assistance, Sandra managed to find a place for Emma in Year 9 in another school.

7 Good practice examples

A number of Australian primary school and local government initiatives have been particularly successful in engaging and informing their parent community. Such strategies range from issuing information guides on children’s health and development; to parent empowerment, education and participation activities in the form of a parent club and library; to fundraising and campaign events which involve both families and the wider community. All approaches emphasise a ‘whole of community’ approach. The examples outlined below are from Victoria.

Broadmeadows Early Years Partnership, Victoria

In the outer suburban City of Hume, the Broadmeadows Early Years Partnership is a strategy that encompasses a range of initiatives which are building on recent research on parental engagement and parents’ information needs.

\(^4\) Sandra and Emma are pseudonyms.
Firstly, prepared by the Broadmeadows Early Years Partnership and recommended by local child and family agencies and primary schools, the *Giving your child the best start in life* guide offers suggestions for parents and carers of babies and young children living in the municipality. Broken into four age-specific sections, from birth to starting primary school, the guide provides information and pointers on children’s health, learning, education and wellbeing. Suggestions range from attending milestone Maternal and Child Health nurse appointments to encouraging thinking and language development through play, singing and reading. The guide is easy to read, with clear and concise bullet points.

Secondly parental engagement has been a key area. This includes the introduction of a new model of preschool teacher training which commits teachers to share the targets they set for the children with the parents, as already required of accredited childcare staff but not of preschool teachers. The facilitator explained how the new model is different from their previous provision of information:

> The program is on the wall for parents to look at if they wish to but unless a parent specifically asked about what their child was doing or the teacher actually sort of just chatted about it, generally it’s by invitation probably only if you like because parents are coming and going and there’s not a lot of dialog in that sort of sense but under this new model of course preschool teachers are being asked to show the objectives to the parents

Thirdly, there are information events such as evenings in childcare centres at which parents can ask questions and communicate with each other:

> We operate four childcare centres so parents get a range of information obviously through the childcare centres in terms of information evenings. You know, transition into long day care, and the parents ask lots and lots of questions … about what happens to your child so there’s a lot of information sharing from that point of view. (Facilitator)

Fourthly, the considerable number of facilitated playgroups includes several facilitated in Arabic and Turkish to attract parents of CALD backgrounds.

Fifthly, there is an attempt to harmonise transition programs into primary schools for preschoolers across the region.

**Maldon Primary School, Victoria**

Maldon PS is a small rural primary school with a current enrolment of 88 students. It serves a predominantly low socioeconomic community. The school initiatives aim to improve educational outcomes for their students by involving their families in innovative and effective events. Recognising the time pressures and financial burdens facing working families, the school holds a few events a year rather than inundating their families with too many requests. Each event is organised through the Parents’ Club, with the intention of building stronger community relationships between the school, families and local businesses. The success of such events is due significantly to the range and breadth of parental engagement strategies and activities formed by the school.

The school newsletter is a well received vehicle which advertises all the initiatives. It is distributed in both print and electronic form. Its layout is regularly reviewed to ensure that its format is user-friendly. Sections are colour coded to signify important calendar, information and activities. Particular colours represent different topics or requests (e.g. parents know they are required to complete a corresponding form if the section is highlighted a certain colour). Moreover, the newsletter also has a question-and-answer column to which the principal responds. All of these techniques are applied with the aim of increasing parent access and uptake of the newsletter so that the following initiatives are promoted and well attended.
Parent club
The Parent Club is the school’s main fundraising driver and is also partly responsible for implementing its Parent Empowerment and Participation Project (PEPP) initiatives which are funded by the National Safe Schools Framework. The club meets monthly to discuss a broad range of wellbeing issues, ideas and concerns raised by the parent community. It enables parents to get to know each other and learn more about the school and its current curriculum. New parents are personally invited to attend and their ideas and feedback are listened to, valued and acknowledged. The Parent Club also seeks ways to overcome practical obstacles which can prevent parents from participating in school activities. This may include providing childcare, car pooling, flexible meeting times and venue, and funds to enable attendance where money is an issue.

Classroom parent contact program
Each grade has a contact parent who provides support to the class teacher and parents of children in the respective year level. These people serve an important role in helping to build and sustain the family-school partnership and to create a sense of connectedness within the school community. The contact parent’s role includes welcoming new families to the school; helping families to connect with each other; assisting the classroom teacher with various tasks; and being a person whom other parents can approach for information, support and feedback on school-related issues. The contact person is also able to connect parents to other school forums such as the school council and the parent club.

Parent education sessions
Parent education sessions are held on topics that have been identified as priorities for the Maldon parent community. The school newsletter dedicates a section to parent education topics for those unable to attend the sessions. The meetings are often held in conjunction with Wellbeing Evenings where information, demonstrations and displays of varied school activities relating to the wellbeing of students are exhibited.

Parent meeting room and parent library
The school has given the parents their own room, a friendly and positive space with refreshment facilities and resource information at hand. The room will be used for parent club meetings, parent education sessions and Parent Cuppa gatherings. The parent library is another welcoming space for parents. Funded and facilitated by the parent club, it holds an array of books on parenting skills, puberty, work-life balance, problem solving, and single parenting.

Parent classroom visits and Parent Cuppa meetings
Parents are encouraged to share their strengths, interests or skills within the classroom. This can range from assisting library sessions to talking about their job/career/interests in Share Week:

It’s great ’cos people can come on their own terms. Wouldn’t matter what they could do.
Like one parent, she hadn’t been employed for a while, she just came and made pizza with the kids. (Staff member)

A further informal initiative is the Parent Cuppa meetings, which take place once a week, enabling parents to catch up, forge friendships and exchange parenting experiences and stories.

Sunshine Primary School, Victoria
Sunshine PS is located in Melbourne’s inner west and serves a diverse socioeconomic and cultural community. It has a current enrolment of 263 students, catering for children from 16 different cultures and parents representing 25 nationalities. The school operates a number of initiatives in the hope of engaging all their families. Like Maldon PS, Sunshine PS has also made a substantial effort in updating its newsletter to make it more appealing to parents.
Well basically we’ve made … as simple as changing fonts, adding pictures. Just setting it so it’s more appealing—like reader appealing. You know, putting points of interest in … just making it look more attractive … rather than just sort of a whole page of black writing. (Staff member)

Meet the Teacher and end-of-year celebrations

A formal parent–teacher program is in place, which includes three annual Meet the Teacher sessions an end-of-year celebration to showcase the children’s work. The latter is a less formal affair, which the students attend with their parents. As the celebration is student-oriented and family-inclusive, it takes the focus off individual parents who might otherwise feel uncomfortable attending a one-to-one parent–teacher interview:

Because the kids are putting pressure on parents at home, ‘You need to come, I want to show you my work’. So it’s kind of taken away from the old traditional ‘Oh my god, what’s the teacher going to say’, and breaking down a few barriers in that way and that the kids are actually, you know, leading the parents to the school, which is great. (Staff member)

Student-led conferences and curriculum activities

To break up the year, the school also organises a student-led conference which is another occasion for parents to attend and learn about their child’s learning journeys via student presentations. Moreover, at the end of each curriculum piece, the children decide on an activity which incorporates what they have learned. Family members are invited to come along and take part. For example, last year the prep students were taught about healthy eating and upon conclusion of this curriculum piece, they decided to run a café for family members. The students were responsible for everything from designing a menu, writing invitations and making placemats, to delegating tasks such as waitressing and cooking. This is another inventive example of engaging parents in a non-pressured way. Parents visited the student café and enjoyed a meal with their children while reading the students’ work. In order to include the wider community, parents were asked to leave a gold coin tip which the children used to buy presents for the Kmart Wishing Tree.

Engaging CALD parent initiatives

This student-centred approach to parental engagement is particularly effective for the school in connecting with their culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. As they are told about such activities by their children rather than through printed or electronic material, CALD parents are increasingly attending school activities. The focus on displaying student work, rather than conducting formal parent–teacher interviews, also proves a more effective way to communicate. Further, the work of a multicultural education aide is helping to overcome another parent–school barrier, as some CALD parents take the view that home and school life should remain separate. In order to encourage parent participation, the aide organises cooking days when members of diverse communities come to school to cook traditional dishes for the students and staff:

They tend to believe the teachers do their job and they shouldn’t be involved. But we have here what we call a multicultural education aide … she links our Vietnamese community families and they do a big cooking day … so they’ll put on a meal and we’ll sit down and eat together at lunch time, and that’s been a real opening I guess in getting those families in. And they actually sit down with the teachers and have food together and talk. (Staff member)

8 Discussion

The vital role of parents in their children’s development and education and the importance of good and effective communication between parents and staff in early childhood services and schools is being recognised by both researchers (see literature review) and also all the professionals in government and community services interviewed for this research. The recently published Family-school partnerships framework (DEEWR 2008) demonstrates the Australian Government’s
commitment to improving partnerships between families and schools. It identifies effective school–parent communication, connecting learning at home and at school and recognising the family’s role as primary educator of children as three of the key dimensions of planning partnerships.

The present research on information needs of low-income parents supports the above critical elements. It also affirms the features of effective communication described by DEEWR (2008, p.5)—particularly that it should be ‘active, personal, frequent and culturally appropriate’, and schools should ‘go out of their way to make families feel welcome and valued’. Our research shows that successful communication with the most disadvantaged parents will require a targeted and collaborative effort of all stakeholders, which goes beyond the narrow task of communication and covers the wider field of engagement.

The most disadvantaged parents are those who are facing a combination of problems such as low-income, low education level, poor skills, low level of literacy, unemployment or unskilled employment, physical or mental health problems, housing insecurity. These issues are often linked and compound each other, and have been captured by the concept of social exclusion (SEU 1997). Social exclusion impacts adversely on parents’ capability to seek, understand and follow up on information regarding their children’s development and learning. An effective approach to ensure parents receive and act upon communications needs to be based on a holistic understanding of social exclusion.

A holistic response to the communication barriers faced by parents would therefore require joint action by government to provide:

- families with the resources and capabilities they need to ensure the success of their children in entering, moving through and beyond the education system. It would include information on health and wellbeing, and the development of a healthy learner identity. It would equally value the range of pathways available to young people and contribute to their understanding of how those pathways can be combined in ways that meet the needs and interests of the young person (Kamp & Horn 2008, p.8).

Communication in trusting and respectful relationships

Communication between staff in early childhood services and parents or between school and parents occurs in many different forms, including printed handouts, electronic newsletters, scheduled appointments (e.g. with a MCHN or a teacher) and informal gatherings (e.g. playgroup chats). To be understood, information needs to be presented in a way that is clearly relevant and easily understandable for parents with poor language skills. Personal information sources ranked as the most popular among most parents consulted for this research. However the quality of the relationship and contact between the parent and their informant is a significant parameter of the success of the communication, particularly for parents who experience social exclusion.

Parents with financial difficulties or low-status employment, a poor education history or low literacy and communication skills often struggle to communicate effectively with various professionals, whether personally or in writing. This may be due to their low self-esteem and self-confidence, their fear of being judged negatively as parents by education professionals or their difficulties in grasping the content of some information. These parents may for example lack the confidence to raise concerns about their child in their appointment with the MCHN. They may lack the cognitive skills to understand an information pack on educational pathways provided by the school. Parents who have had past difficult relationships with services including schools may avoid contact with institutions altogether. Efforts by early childhood services and schools to engage these parents need to be based on an understanding of the barriers parents are facing, combined with a welcoming, open and respectful attitude and, ideally, with the provision of support.

Good practice examples of parent–school or parent–service communication tend to show a conscious effort by the school or service to welcome parents regardless of their cultural, economic
and educational background. Parents themselves favour personal information sources where they feel accepted and supported rather than criticised or shamed.

Most successful are the information channels that provide not only information but also support and that focus on the children as a conduit to assisting the parents. One example is a childcare service that is targeted to parents from various cultural backgrounds who live in an inner city housing estate. Parents whose children attend the centre also receive support in other matters such as transition support into primary school or assistance with understanding a letter from Centrelink or solving housing or health issues. Another example is a playgroup facilitated by a community organisation in regional Victoria, where parents find respite and emotional support through social contacts in addition to receiving information about specialists their child might need to see based on the facilitator’s observations.

**Parental engagement and school–parent communication**

Interpretations of parents’ failure to engage with information provided by the department, MCHN or schools vary between the concerned parties. School staff on the one hand may view parents as disinterested in their child’s development and education. Community workers see parents’ difficulties in communicating with teachers or services based on their everyday struggle with a host of issues.

Parents on the other hand may view some information as irrelevant compared with their own and their peers’ experience as a parent. They may have found a recommended action failed to work for them in the past and no longer trust the information provided to them. Of course, this mistrust is not specific to socially disadvantaged parents. More indicative of the impact of social exclusion, however, is when parents do not take up the information accessible to them because they lack the economic or cognitive means to put the printed or verbally communicated knowledge into practice. They may not be able to afford nutritious meals for their children, or a computer with internet access. They may lack the time, literacy skills, clear mind or safe and undisturbed space in the house to sit down with their children to help them with their homework or ‘simply’ read to them.

Previous research together with existing support programs, policy initiatives and good practice examples demonstrate the importance of both partners, parents on the one hand and professional staff on the other hand, understanding and valuing each other’s roles and contributions. Programs like HIPPY and PACTS or the Team-Up campaign in NZ apply the strategy of increasing parents’ confidence in supporting their children’s development and learning by providing the necessary resources (e.g. games, books, information). School-based good practice includes parent education sessions accompanied by information in newsletters and attempts to attract parents to the school beyond parent–teacher interviews. Parents’ involvement needs to be encouraged by schools valuing the role of parents as their children’s first teachers and parents’ knowledge of their children.

Valuing the role and contributions of parents may not be a problem for teachers communicating with middle-class parents who sit the school council, consistently attend school-based events and easily relate to the teacher. However school and teachers may take a different stance in communicating with parents who fail to attend school events or parent–teacher interviews, do not respond to entries in the students’ journals, or have poor communication skills. They may interpret a lack of contact as disinterest or apathy or on the parent’s part.

However parents’ absence may be a consequence of, for example, time poverty due to lacking support or to working hours, lacking access to transport, a fear of judgment or embarrassment, a mental health problem or all of the above. Staff in early childhood services and schools may need a better understanding of social exclusion and its impact on parental engagement. Teachers’ professional development both pre and in-service needs to incorporate strategies to communicate with disadvantaged and disengaged parents, based on an understanding of the impact of structural as well as physical, mental and cognitive barriers these parents are facing.
For their part, parents need to be assisted in better understanding their own important role and responsibility in their child’s development and learning in partnership with the contributions of professionals at childcare, kindergarten, primary and secondary school. A number of communication factors are working against such an understanding at present. Information sources such as the Child Health Record or parent–teacher interviews are not presented in a manner that encourages parents’ self-understanding as partners of other professionals. Parents are unsure, for example, about interpreting their children’s development because they fail to understand the Child Health Record as a reference book on developmental milestones. Or they regard the parent–teacher interview as a ‘last minute call’ about their children’s problems at school when it is too late for them to do anything. To help parents to fulfil their role as co-educators and transition supports, communication from schools in particular needs to be more regular rather than in bulk at the start of Year 10 or 11 or in biannual parent–teacher interviews, to include face-to-face contact where parents can ask questions and raise concerns, and to be easily accessible both physically (in print) and cognitively (through appropriate language and pictures).

**Reaching to the most disengaged families**

Even the provision of accessible information may not be sufficient however to reach people who have disengaged from mainstream services. As mentioned before, the recent *Family-school partnerships framework* (DEEWR 2008) suggests that schools—and services can be added here—may need to ‘go out of their way to make families feel welcome and valued’. This may mean extending their activity beyond their site, for example the Maternal Child Health Centre or the school, by providing outreach staff.

The Mobile Outreach Therapy Team in NSW is an example of such an approach. Its services aim to increase school readiness for children of vulnerable families and operate in families’ homes as well as community locations, since those families often do not access centre-based care.

Another example of outreach work identified by this research is a parent liaison worker at a primary school. While this worker is based at the school, she is much more accessible—physically as well as psychologically—for parents than are teachers and her networking extends outside the school. Several of the staff and many parents interviewed called for schools in particular to be proactive in reaching disadvantaged families and favoured the idea of a school-based parent liaison worker. While parents looked primarily to the school for education-related information, some were prevented from seeking or receiving the information they needed by their negative relationship with schools in general or with specific teachers. An alternative information channel such as a parent liaison worker would serve as a port of call for parents, parallel to student welfare officers for students. To fulfil their role as their child’s first teacher, transition support and co-educator, parents often need additional support that childcare, kindergarten or school staff cannot be expected to provide. However, there is a need for a space where parents can express their need for support without fearing to be judged and causing negative impact on their child’s relationship with school. An outreach or parent liaison worker would provide such a space.

Effective outreach work also includes inviting parents into the school for events that do not focus on their children’s academic development or lack thereof (as parent–teacher interviews do) or their own learning (as parent information sessions do) but on other areas of interest. The good practice example of the science night at Sunshine Primary School pursued such an approach. Rather than trying to ‘teach’ the parents anything, the event attracted children to come with their parents into the school and participate in a fun event. Another example is the Parents Share Week at Maldon Primary School, where parents come in and share an interest or skill with the class, which makes them feel valued as a person.

The content of information provided by the school can form part of this attempt to reach the most disengaged parents. Newsletters, for example, become more relevant for highly disadvantaged
parents if they include useful information about financial subsidies such as the Education Maintenance Allowance, free access to kindergarten (for younger siblings) or free community resources for parents. This combination of school-related information with information on support parallels the combination of information and support in community settings which made them preferred information sources for the parents interviewed. Such a communication strategy could be part of a more holistic approach to parental engagement which addresses also the most disadvantaged parents.

The information parents receive, whether in writing or in person, needs to be based on an understanding of a partnership between parents and their child’s successive institutions from childcare to secondary school. It also requires an understanding of the impact of different forms of social disadvantage on the parents’ capability to engage with information and a commitment to overcome this impact.

9 Recommendations

The following recommendations are made on the basis of the discussed research findings in combination with the literature and policy review:

Information content and language

More effective information is needed in key areas

Information gaps point to the need for more effective information provision about:
- the role and importance of kindergarten
- the right of Health Care Card holders to a subsidy for 4-year-old kindergarten and how to access the subsidy
- at the local level, on the different features of each kindergarten or primary schools
- breastfeeding
- child development and milestones, as well as information that helps parents to identify delays and reasons for concern
- the importance of play for a child’s development (and hints on various valuable ‘types’ of play)
- alternative educational pathways outside the mainstream school system, especially for post-primary students
- parents’ role as first teachers and partners of professionals such as childcare staff and teachers in their child’s development and education
- changes for parents in the course of major transitions (kindergarten to prep and school, primary school to secondary school, school to training and employment)
- a child’s progress at school, especially if falling behind

Focus on children may be more effective than focus on parents

Many parents with low education levels or low socioeconomic status dread being criticised in their parenting role or ‘taught’ by childcare, education and health professionals. To preclude the intimidating potential of some information aiming to change parents’ behaviour, it is generally more effective to focus on the child’s progress and wellbeing rather than the parent’s actions.

Lots of things are happening out in the community and it’s by those sorts of things happening that you can then get your information out. Just gently, without making it [obvious] you’re trying to teach them things. (Early childhood worker, community sector)
Content needs to consider culturally diverse audiences
Culturally sensitive communication is achieved not only through making content available in different languages but also through the content itself. Information on parenting and education is always culturally based, as are the institutions that provide services to children and parents, from childcare centres to schools. The wording of information disseminated to parents as well as verbal communication with parents needs to be based on this understanding of cultural appropriateness.

Everyday language is essential to reach all audiences
Information needs to be presented in everyday language, accessible to audiences with low education and literacy levels. Technical terms need to be kept to a minimum and explained if they are unavoidable.

More pictorial material is needed
Pictures alongside text help readers to understand, follow and digest the information provided in the text. Readers with low literacy levels rely heavily on images to take up information. One example of such a focus on pictorial presentation is a poster that has been produced within the Communities for Children initiative, which illustrates the role model parents are for their children:

We need to get away from the things that are heavy on words. We need to think of other [media]. So visual, auditory, and get away from the reading. (Early childhood worker, local government)

Information dissemination strategies

Communication occurs most effectively in person accompanied by information in writing
Information to socially disadvantaged parents is ideally communicated both personally and in writing. Across the different age groups, parents interviewed definitely preferred personal communication to print, yet appreciated information in writing to prepare for face-to-face communication as well as for future reference. Due to low literacy levels and the importance of personal relationships, face-to-face communication is the recommended information channel for disadvantaged parents:

Rather than spending thousands of dollars on a brochure, having a community or a playgroup facilitator for us costs about $5000 a year, so you know that would be much more effective than the $5000 worth of brochure. Because you’ve just got to have someone who’s going to, you know, make it come alive in terms of engaging with people. (Early childhood worker, community sector)

Community facilitated playgroups need to be supported as a prime information channel
Facilitated playgroups are a prime channel for information dissemination as well as community capacity building among parents of young children. By focusing on the children while offering respite for parents, they provide a non-threatening and not-stigmatised channel for connecting socially disadvantaged parents with services and in particular, with information they may need even without knowing. This finding highlights the necessity to improve funding for community-based playgroups.

Schools, the preferred information channel for parents of school-aged children, need to provide more timely and face-to-face communication opportunities for parents.
Parents of primary and secondary students tend to prefer to access information related to their children’s education from school rather than any other information channel. However, the identified barriers identified to accessing information through schools suggest the need for improvements:

- Schools need to monitor the effectiveness of their information channels in reaching all parents
• Schools need to survey parents’ information needs and communication preferences including available and preferred hours as well as media for contact
• Written information that is distributed electronically needs also to be available in print and parents need to be able to access these print outs in other ways than through their children.
• Journals for parent–school communication are a useful tool if they are getting used by teachers on an ongoing level
• Schools/teachers need to be better resourced to provide with parents with more ongoing information on their child’s progress during the year, as biannual parent–teacher interviews may not be sufficient to keep parents up to date and allow for their effective engagement
• Schools need to provide parents with more opportunities for face-to-face communication, particularly with new teachers, where they can ask questions and raise concerns
• The use of students as messengers of information to their parents needs to be critically examined in terms of its effectiveness.
• In addition to personal exchange, schools could provide parents with access to online data on their children’s progress, for example in an allocated space at school and protected by passwords.

Use television campaigns for key messages
Many socioeconomically disadvantaged parents rely on television as a primary form of entertainment as they cannot afford other forms of entertainment outside the house. Community radio is likely to be important for CALD parents. Several staff recommended TV therefore as a very effective format for key messages to reach disadvantaged families who are disconnected from services:

Short TV grabs of about child development or the importance of reading … those very clear simple messages … because quite often you find with vulnerable families, it’s the one thing that they have is a television. Television is their entertainment. That is their focus. That is their one piece of equipment that they have that gives them real entertainment and joy. So I think… if we need to get these messages out, that’s the medium we need to be using. (Early childhood worker, community sector)

Develop DVD resources on different parenting aspects
Especially for information targeted to parents of very young and pre-school children (e.g. on food, parenting, literacy support), DVDs can be recommended as an effective medium.5 Parents appeared to be highly receptive to modelling of parenting if it occurred in an up-to-date, realistic context that they can identify with. Such a DVD could be accessed through MCHN, facilitated playgroups or even local libraries.

Parental engagement strategies

Outreach workers should be attached to universal childcare settings
Parental engagement by childcare and preschool centres would improve considerably if these services had outreach workers who would get to know the families and show them how to navigate services with them.

Parent liaison workers would improve parent–school communication
Ideally, schools would employ community liaison officers from a welfare background that parents could address if they require information as parents often feel they are wasting teachers’ time or do not feel comfortable addressing teachers in many matters. Additionally, such a liaison person

5 Such a resource was produced at Upfield Primary School within the BEST START framework. The relevant stakeholder was unavailable for an interview in the research period.
would occupy the position between parents and the school that social workers occupy between students and the school and it would act as the key contact person that parents are missing at present. Parents who experience difficulties in communicating with schools due to low confidence or skills and would benefit greatly from such an additional communication channel.

**Schools should be supported to run informal school-based events such as showcasing student activity to help engage parents**

Running informal events to showcase student work can engage parents in a more relaxed manner. Occasions such as student-led conferences and end-of-year celebrations focus positively on student achievements as a group, not only as individuals. If students are assigned responsibilities for these events, they are even more eager for their parents to attend. Thus parent participation can be encouraged through their child rather than through more formal, one-on-one parent–teacher interviews.

**Schools should be required to conduct accessible induction programs for parents, especially at the start of secondary school.**

Parent induction programs should take place at the beginning of Year 7 and Year 10 at times and in formats that are accessible for all parents. Career planning resources such as *Where to now* need to be disseminated to parents too, ideally already in Year 7 or 8.

**Professional development for teachers must address parental engagement in the context of social exclusion**

Professional development which increases teachers’ understanding of the many facets of social exclusion, and how they can affect parental engagement, can enable teachers to respond more sensitively to the information needs and barriers of socioeconomically disadvantaged parents. Since social exclusion impacts on parents’ ability to receive and act upon information, an assumption by schools and teachers that parents’ failure to engage is due to disinterest or apathy may compound this exclusion. An increasingly popular resource mentioned by several staff interviewed is a workshop called ‘Understanding Poverty’, run by Social Solutions and informed by Ruby Payne’s book, *A framework for understanding poverty*. This resource could be considered for a professional development course.

A framework for understanding poverty discusses the hidden rules that govern how each of us behaves in our social class. These rules, because they are hidden and only known to those within the group, prove to be a major stumbling block for individuals trying to move to a new social class. Students from poverty often languish in classrooms because middle class rules are those that govern, and many of us don’t recognise these different rules.

…


**Effective internal communication at schools in relation to families needs to be ensured**

Effective internal school communication needs to be ensured, to preclude parents’ frustration at calling into a ‘black hole’ where messages are lost, for example, between administrative staff who follow up on absenteeism, student welfare officers and teaching staff. Poor internal school communication on individual students is likely to lead to parents’ mistrust in the school’s adequate care and responsibility for the child.
Conclusion

Parents have a vital role to play in every stage of their child’s learning and development. However, a number of parents face multiple barriers that prevent them from thoroughly engaging with their child’s education and the school community. Both the level of disadvantage and the poor engagement in their children’s learning impact upon school retention and educational attainment.

To successfully reach and engage the most disadvantaged parents, multiple communication methods need to be adopted which should go beyond dissemination of information. While the dissemination of written material between the department, schools and parents is important, evidence from this research suggests that additional measures are needed to ensure that information is taken up and acted upon by parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds across all stages of child development.

Written information should be checked for readability and cultural appropriateness so that it is appropriate for and able to be absorbed by parents who have literacy, learning development or language barriers. Moreover, written material should be disseminated through a trusted source wherever possible to ensure uptake by the diverse parental populations in Victoria.

Parents must be engaged at a personal level through the development of a trusting relationship with education professionals. The quality of the connection between parent and professional is a significant parameter leading to increased knowledge and changed behaviour of parents. Given the level of social exclusion of some parents, strategies such as outreach work and a parent liaison officer role are essential to a successful communication strategy.

A more holistic approach that values the role and contribution of parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, as co-educators, makes an important contribution to their capacity to act on communication materials from the department. Professional staff therefore need a better understanding of social exclusion and its impact on parental engagement.

The Victorian Government is acting to improve education attainment through wide ranging reforms including the recent Blueprint. The evidence from our consultations in this study support more proactive communication strategies for building parental engagement in child learning if the Government is to achieve its goal of improving the retention and completion rates of those currently at risk of dropping out.
## Appendix 1

### Table A1 Participants in stakeholder consultation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position, Organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Janet Williams-Smith</td>
<td>Former Manager, Napier Street Family Resource Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxwell Broadway</td>
<td>Family Support Officer, Ecumenical Migration Centre, BSL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Broderick</td>
<td>Family &amp; Children Services, Hume City Council, formerly MCHN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Spencer</td>
<td>Children’s Services Community Facilitator, BEST START, Frankston City Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Licciardo</td>
<td>Consultant, Youth Connect, Local Community Partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June Michael</td>
<td>Consultant, Youth Connect, Local Community Partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Peterson</td>
<td>Consultant, Youth Connect, Local Community Partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally Everitt</td>
<td>Policy Adviser, Early Years, Municipal Association of Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith Gray</td>
<td>Early Years Partnership Facilitator, Broadmeadows UnitingCare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delia Murrey</td>
<td>Youth Services Officer, City of Casey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger van Langenberg</td>
<td>Assistant Principal, Hampton Park Secondary College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Wannan</td>
<td>School Welfare Officer, Hampton Park Secondary College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose Rennie</td>
<td>Secondary School Nursing Manager &amp; Early Childhood Intervention Services Intake Team Leader, DHS, Gippsland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail Evans</td>
<td>Specialist Children’s Services (Direct Services) Team Leader, DHS, Gippsland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmel Berger</td>
<td>Partnerships and Primary School Nursing Program Manager, DHS, Gippsland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire Bayliss</td>
<td>Principal, Maldon Primary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyn Read</td>
<td>Assistant Principal, Sunshine Primary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kellie Taylor</td>
<td>Education Development Worker and Youth Pathways Coach, BSL Frankston</td>
</tr>
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</table>
# Appendix 2

**Table A2 Focus groups with parents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group site</th>
<th>Organised through</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Stage (children’s age group)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broadmeadows</td>
<td>Parent liaison worker, Coolaroo PS</td>
<td>28 October</td>
<td>Primary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankston</td>
<td>Youth Pathways, BSL, Frankston</td>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moe</td>
<td>Playgroup, Good Beginnings</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzroy</td>
<td>Community Liaison worker, EMC</td>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzroy</td>
<td>Breakfast Club, BSL</td>
<td></td>
<td>Primary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzroy</td>
<td>Napier Street Family Resource Centre, BSL</td>
<td></td>
<td>Primary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzroy</td>
<td>Napier Street Family Resource Centre, BSL</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool</td>
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</tbody>
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