

# **It didn't happen by accident!**

## ***Learnings from setting up a successful integrated early childhood service***

### **Introduction**

In this paper we will explore elements of setting up a successful integrated early childhood service from our experiences. We believe that it takes conscious thought and intentional planning from the tiny details to the big picture to create a successful service that meets the needs of families with young children. This extends to the recruitment, training and maintenance of morale for the people that work in the service. While some details may be thought of as common sense or not important, we have been to many family and children's services where they do not happen. We will draw from a range of theories and models including Strengths-based, Circle of Security, Herzberg, business customer service and hospitality.

We will be using our experiences at Seaton Central to ask a series of reflective questions. Our aim is not to see Seaton Central replicated everywhere, but to challenge dated thinking about community services and share our learnings that can then be adapted to other local settings.

The questions we will ask include are you considering the small details? Do you have a customer service mentality? Do you have time to ignore this? We will argue that decisions about coffee cups and tea-towels are just as important as staffing or building design. Corporate customer service and the hospitality industry have been very good at recognising the importance of staff training and care of customers, but sadly community services have been reluctant to recognise the value of a hospitality platform in both reaching out to the community and also sustaining staff.

We acknowledge that these concepts are not new to the majority of workers, but emphasize that they are hard to do and even harder to maintain. To be successful, service providers need to be aware of the complexities of our workplace. Decisions are often made intuitively and reactively, therefore we suggest that community services need to make intentional decisions to maintain best practice.

### **Background information**

We (Joanne Bros and Judyth Roberts) worked together in a Communities for Children site in Adelaide's North Western suburbs called Seaton Central. The broker or facilitating partner is UnitingCare Wesley Port Adelaide. The site is a building in the local school, Seaton Park Primary School, and brings together health, education, community and well-being services. The suburb of Seaton was revealed in the AEDI data as severely disadvantaged. Two years ago we started with two empty rooms and now there are in excess of 200 families accessing services which are provided by over 10 agencies each week. Through Community Partners some of the programs offered include playgroup, supported playgroups, group for women with PND, programs for 3 and 4 year olds, crèche training, a community garden, Take-a-break Café and home visiting. Other services that are offered are counselling, CYWHS drop-in and health checks, access visits, programs for children with disabilities and family events.

## Promotion

How do you promote your service?

Think about commercial branding and how big companies sell their products and services. As the market has an increasing number of products and those products become increasingly similar, more and more companies are turning to branding to attract consumers. Branding has been the essential factor in the success of well-known consumer goods such as Coca Cola, McDonald's, Kodak, and Mercedes. Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006) add that branding goes further than the building a name for a set of products or services. Branding is about promising that the company's products will create and deliver a certain level of performance. B-Net, an online resource for businesses, states that branding is not a product, a company or a logo, but instead is a promise, an experience or a relationship (B-Net, 2007). This links with we want families to feel about us. That is, that when they see our branding, it is strongly associated with positive experiences.

"A great brand raises the bar -- it adds a greater sense of purpose to the experience, whether it's the challenge to do your best in sports and fitness, or the affirmation that the cup of coffee you're drinking really matters." - Howard Schultz (CEO, Starbucks Corp.)

If we continue to look at branding in corporate terms, it is what defines the company and it's point of difference with it's competitors. When branding works, the sales people enter the offices of customers already well-known and respected, and ready to hear what they have to say (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006). While many aspects of top brands are evoked by a symbol or logo, often with few words, we should remember that these brands also evoke feelings.

How do you present your service? What do your brochures, posters and other media say about you?

Brochures that are of poor quality, are badly photocopied, contain too much information yet make it hard to find the information required are familiar to everyone. In the worst cases the details are wrong or out of date. A growing number of agencies, including Government and non-Government, are becoming more aware of this and have developed style guides and promotion guidelines.

We would encourage you to consider the following questions when you are developing or updating a brochure or flyer;

What is main message you want to get across?

What image do you want to project?

Who do you want to reach? (families or other service providers?)

We would further challenge you to think about the jargon you use and how easy it is to read. Especially think about new mothers who are sleep deprived, or families from CALD backgrounds. Can you use pictures to illustrate the main concepts or points? Are your contact details easy to find? Is there a map to help families find you? To relate this point back to branding, do all of your brochures have a similar feel or look to them?

Everyone in your service is responsible for promotion, and even more they are responsible for promoting it in a positive light. For example, what we say to our families about our job when we go home, or what we say to people we don't know, like the girl at the supermarket on the way home from work who notices your badge.

## Customer Service

Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of amazon.com, describes a brand by: "It's what people say about you when you are not in the room".

Where have you experienced excellent customer service?

We can all name times when we have experienced bad service and how that made us feel and how it influenced our decision to go back to that business again. We have also all experienced great customer service, and know the products where we are likely to be treated well every time.

Customer service is becoming such an important issue that even the Australian Government has a webpage dedicated to it ([www.business.gov.au](http://www.business.gov.au)). Good customer service is considered essential for the ongoing success of a business and bad customer service leads to fewer customers and less return customers. Businesses that make quality customer service a top priority can generate higher profits and get greater market share (Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources, 2007).

So what does this mean for community services? The principles are the same for community services and the corporate sector, and just as important. In today's society many parents, especially the Y generation, consider themselves consumers in all aspects of their lives, including playgroup, preschool, health services and other community-based services. These families reward those services that meet their needs and reject those that are not responsive to their needs and expectations.

Customer service can be defined as "meeting the needs and expectations of the customer as defined by the customer" (General Web Directory, 2007). There are two main elements to this definition. "Meeting the needs and expectations of the customer" means that you know what your consumers want, what they expect, and you provide that to them on a consistent basis. This also implies that in order to know what your customers want, you do have to ask them.

The second part of the definition above is the critical part: "As defined by the customer" This means that if the consumer does not perceive you as offering good customer service, then you are not. This is fundamental because despite how good you think your service is, it really doesn't matter if your consumers aren't happy. Therefore, to have an effective customer service, you must know what your consumers want, provide it to them on a consistent basis, and ask them how you are doing.

There are several benefits of good customer service. Some of the benefits for corporate businesses are also relevant for community services, especially those for staff including minimising stress, increasing morale and job satisfaction. Research shows that it costs five to six times more to gain a new customer than it does to keep an existing one (General Web Directory, 2007; All business, 2007a).

Negative buying experiences are almost always linked to inferior or substandard customer service. There are many hints and tips for dealing effectively with customers to create a culture that values customers. These include:

- Greet your customers—"Put me at ease and make me feel comfortable!"  
This is when first impressions can help or hurt
- Value customers—"Let me know that you think I'm important!"  
A customer-focused organization is not in business to deliver a product or service, but, instead, is there to enable people to enjoy the benefits of its product or service
- Ask how to help your customers—"Find out what I want!"
- Listen to customers—"Please listen to me and understand me!"

According to a UCLA study on communication, 7% of our communication is verbal, 38% is tone of voice, and 55% is nonverbal.

- Help customers—"Help me get what I want!"  
Explain how your product or service benefits them—how it satisfies a need, solves their problems, or gives them extra value
- Invite customers back—"Let me know that I'm welcomed back anytime!"  
This is about last impressions. Thank them for coming in or contacting you.

Adapted from: Hey, I'm the Customer by Ron Willingham (General Web Directory, 2007)

When a business provides remarkable customer service, the customer often does remark about it! To their friends or colleagues who are also potential clients. Joel Spolsky, CEO of Fog Creek (2007) notes that when a customer has a problem and you fix it, they're actually going to be even more satisfied than if they had never had a problem in the first place. He adds that many dissatisfied customers don't contact you, they just fume quietly. The majority of customers don't like to complain; in fact, they'll go out of their way — perhaps all the way to another service — to avoid it. If you hear unhappy murmurings from your consumers, take their complaints seriously and do your best to soothe their dissatisfaction. (All business, 2007b).

Taking all this in to account, think about the customer service that your service provides:  
How do you answer the phone?  
How we present from when our 'customers' arrive in the car park?  
How do we deal with complaints?

## **Welcoming, family friendly spaces**

Integrated service sites must be family and child friendly spaces. It sounds logical that they are welcoming, inclusive and safe, but it does present a challenge with shared spaces used by a variety of services, especially when none take the lead role.

Let's assume we have got our promotion right, what's the next stage? What does the car park look like? Can families even find the car park and their way into it? What about when they come inside? Is there space to park a pram? Is it clear which way to go? And where to find the room or person you are looking for? Look around the kitchen and toilets and try to imagine you are seeing them for the first time. How does it appear? Bright and welcoming or untidy and in need of TLC? Are signs current and do they contain information about the day and time of your group with contact details?"

What are your first impressions? From the outside would you want to go in?

At Seaton Central we were very aware that when we started that the building wasn't welcoming on the outside, it looked old and in need of an update. But by being aware of that we were able to counteract it by warning families what to expect, by having signs up, and by giving good descriptions on the phone and in brochures etc.

Integrated sites need spaces for adults to meet, get together and have their needs met, for example training, counselling, support groups etc. However spaces not used every day should not be not used as dumping ground for equipment or spare bits and pieces. We acknowledge that storage can be a particularly difficult challenge with spaces that are shared and used by a variety of services.

## **Details make the difference**

Integrated services need to put thought into the subliminal messages that are sent to parents and carers, other service providers, visitors and our own staff, when they enter the building. This includes making intentional decisions about little details such as the types,

colours and style of cups or mugs we have, the tea towels, cutting boards, teaspoons and the variety coffee and tea flavours available, including decaffeinated coffee and green teas.

We need to think about the simple things, like the way we offer hospitality. At Seaton Central this often starts with tea and coffee. We don't always offer meals but we do say would you like a cuppa? In today's society offering a cup of coffee is more than being hospitable, coffee is now a social gathering. This is evidenced by the growing plethora of coffee shop chains across the suburbs. Today's adults, including parents, are used to choice and high quality.

We challenge you to think about these little details in your centre and the messages they send to the families who come into your service. For example the message given by the coffee mugs, hand-me downs, left-overs from the 70's, compared to something that is nice to hold, good to drink from, offering choice. A new cup that is clean and feels nice to hold, sends a message that everyone is important, whereas a chunky cup sends the message that it was cheap to buy, a foam cup says no one wants to do the dishes. Good cups say that the parents are just as important as the staff. A choice of teas or decaf coffee says we respect parents and their choices, particularly those that are pregnant or breast feeding.

### **Don't forget the children**

Parents with young children come as a "package deal" and should be considered together. Children are nearly always in these spaces too. Children don't just stay in the crèche or play room if they are upset, being breast fed, or waiting

Therefore the environment must also be set up for children's success, and to minimize potential for children and parents/carers to become frustrated. For example, imagine a child in a group room that has lots of nooks and crannies to explore, under tables and chairs, and buttons to push on TV's and DVD machines, books to read, telephones to ring, etc. How is the child supposed to know that this is not a place to play? How does the parent feel trying to stop their child doing what is natural to them? This is especially important if the parent is already stressed or in crisis.

Another factor to reflect on is what toys are available for the children to play with. Are they developmentally appropriate for the children who will be playing with them? Are they easy to use? Are all the pieces there? Imagine you are the child wanting to play with the puzzle, but it is missing several pieces, or you want to play with the trainset, but none of the trains fit on the tracks. How does this child react? Again, imagine you are the parent with this now frustrated child. How is the parent feeling and how do they react?

### **The impact**

If we relate this back to customer service again, if something is "good" it may not be noticed or commented on, but if it is "bad" it is noticed, it is commented on. People tell other people and it heightens awareness to look for other "bad" things.

We believe that it is important to realise that there is an impact of considering the details. It does cost more money and it does take more time. It needs to be acknowledged that it is particularly difficult to achieve a family friendly and welcoming space with different staff, with different standards from a variety of different services.

## **Staff**

The role of every staff member is crucial in the development of a successful integrated service. The staff have to agree with the concept, the vision and what the service is aiming to achieve. This does not happen by accident. Getting the staff on the same page also involves intentional decision making and processes. It is challenging bringing together a range of diverse service providers with varied backgrounds.

There must be time built in to everyone's schedules for regular meetings, and there must be ways of communicating with each other, even those that only come in for two hours a week to run a particular program. We must acknowledge that the staff are diverse with diverse backgrounds and team building opportunities will help staff come together and understand each other's perspectives. Regular staff meetings are difficult and we need to recognise that all staff are busy, but meetings actually make work easier. We need to create opportunities to develop the team and bring the team together, for example shared lunches and birthday celebrations. To relate this back to hospitality, we need to remember to be hospitable to staff members as well as our clients.

Integrated services need to develop a common language, which is based around the families and their needs, or at least an understanding of what others mean when they use certain terms. For example ask some of the people you work with, what do they mean when they say "early intervention", "prevention", "at risk", or even "integrated"? The use of "universal", "supported" and "targeted" in terms of services is common in health services, but hardly used at all in education. The term "integrated" for a childcare staff member may mean childcare integrated with preschool, whereas a nurse might understand it to mean immunisation services integrated into drop-in clinic.

Just because words are commonly used doesn't mean that there is a common understanding of them. We challenge you to think about the terminology that you commonly use to describe your services, and what all members of your integrated team might understand those terms to mean. Don't forget all members of the team, including the health nurse, social worker, teacher, childcare worker, immunisation nurse, cook, cleaner and the administration staff.

For an integrated service to be a successful service that meets the needs of families, we believe that staff need to be satisfied with their work and enjoy being at work. We suggest that there are some factors that can ensure that staff can perform at their best, and we will link some of these factors to two key theories, Herzberg's Motivation Theory and Circle of Security.

### **Herzberg Motivation Theory**

Herzberg was a clinical psychologist and is regarded as one of the great original thinkers in management and motivational theory. His work was initially published in the Harvard Business Review in 1968, and was reprinted in 1987 and 2003 (Herzberg, 2003). He interviewed employees and from the results proposed that the factors that cause job satisfaction were different to those that caused job dissatisfaction. He called the satisfiers, "motivators", and the dissatisfiers, "hygiene factors". He used the term "hygiene" to mean that they are considered maintenance factors that are necessary to avoid dissatisfaction, but they themselves do not provide satisfaction (Gawel, 1997). Some of the factors included as hygiene factors are salary, company policy, interpersonal relationships and the key factor that relates to this paper is working conditions.

When we think about working conditions in today's working world, we should recognise that staff must be able to access the telephone, their emails and documents to do their work. In terms of Herzberg's theory, if they can't access them, they will be dissatisfied and

unmotivated, however when they can access them they will not be any more satisfied or motivated. Often it is difficult for staff in integrated sites, especially those who are part-time, co-located or offering outreach services, to be able to access documents back in the head office when working in the community.

One way we address this issue at Seaton Central is to have a "hot desk" with a networked computer with a generic log on. We then set up individual staff with a free email account. Therefore staff who work across sites can access most documents and emails that they need to in a timely way.

Another aspect of working conditions is that of physically accommodating diverse staff needs. For example, one worker's need for a private conversation by phone and another's to run a noisy playgroup in a joining room. Solutions need to be found for these problems and staff should not be expected to "put up with" poor conditions or to "make it work" by themselves.

### **Circle of Security**

The Circle of Security Project is an innovative early intervention program designed to alter the developmental pathway of parents and their young children. Glen Cooper, Kent Hoffman, and Bert Powell from Marycliff Institute and Robert Marvin from the University of Virginia developed this theory (Circle of Security, 2007). The Circle of Security is represented by the parent's hands as a secure base for their child with the circle extending to allow the child to go out and explore on the top half of the circle and brings them back in on the bottom half of the circle. Hoffman states that often for this to happen, the parents themselves need to be held in a secure relationship. This can be with their parent, a partner, a counsellor or someone else who provides a secure base, exploration on the top half of the circle and support to come back on the bottom half of the circle.

We propose that for staff to hold parents in this "holding environment" they themselves also need to be "held". Kent Hoffman recently visited Australia and described new research they are doing into a "Culture of Security" exploring this topic.

At Seaton Central staff are provided support to explore new things and new ways of doing things, but when they need it they are "brought back in" and supported. Staff provide a secure base for each other. The service providers, staff and volunteers are as important as the families. If no-one is supporting the staff, they won't be able to support the families.

We challenge you to think about the people you work with - do they have someone being "hands" for them? Is there someone they can talk to when they have had a difficult day?

This may take the form of clinical supervision, case review, or something else entirely as required. While social workers have a working environment that is based on a supervision model, educational practice does not have an equivalent to it. However we need to recognise the elements of our own relationships, present and past, that we bring to every relationship we have with the families at our service.

At Seaton, debriefing has become an essential part of every program for all staff involved. Our coordinator makes her self available for half an hour at the end of each program. This debrief uses a strengths-based approach to focus on what did work in each session and what we can improve on.

This debrief time also allows staff to develop a common understanding of what is being achieved and what is behind decisions that were made. After we have understood each person's point of view or perspective we are less likely to undermine what they are doing

and more likely to function as a team. One of the indicators of our success is the number of staff who want to work at the site, and the large number of volunteers that have been recruited and kept.

## **Ownership**

While discussing staff, the issue of ownership arises.

Who owns it? Staff or parents? Which staff and which parents?

"It's not just about going in and fixing people. It's about a theory of change, a legacy of sustainability, and self-sufficiency at the end of that ... because people can do things for themselves, and let us know when we're needed."

Jo Cavanagh, Chief Executive Officer, Family Life

We need to consider who the service is for, it for the staff or the families? Parents and community members should be involved in as much decision making as possible, to the best of their ability. Again this is not easy to achieve and parents need support in developing the skills and knowledge to be able to make informed decisions. A starting point for engagement is how the centre looks. For example pictures and toys that reflect the cultures of families attending can be provided or chosen by parents. Can the parents and carers help decorate the spaces? Parents have brought in a series of Elmo, Buzz Light Year and Superman posters to display around the crèche and playroom. These do not fit with our Early Childhood best practice, however they make the families feel like they have contributed to the centre.

## **Integration**

We believe an integrated site is an organic one, with all the elements interacting with each other. An organic organisation is like an organic creature, you can't analyse it by pulling it apart, because once you pull it apart, it no longer lives and can't be put back together. This is in contrast to a mechanical organisation, which can be pulled apart, examined and put back together again. Living systems have a life of their own and have the capacity to meet adaptive challenges if given the environment to survive. Living systems theory as described by Fritjof Capra, Margaret Wheatley and Richard Pasquale (2000) in their book "Surfing the Edge of Chaos" recognises that life is profoundly interconnected into a "web of life". Small things can have system-wide consequences – the "butterfly effect". All living systems respond to information, sorting out what is useful, leading to growth and adaptation.

## **Play – based learning**

We believe that play-based learning offers a non-threatening way to work with families, setting them up for success, and setting up children for positive behaviour. We don't often have to worry about children's behaviour as the environment is one that encourages cooperative play and successful interactions.

Currently Seaton Central is offering nine play based sessions each week. These are not traditional playgroups as they are highly supported with up to six staff present for a session. These play sessions include mainstream playgroups, music playgroup, baby playgroups, attachment-based baby playgroup, African playgroup, transition program for 3 and 4 year old, literacy program for 3 and 4 year olds, playgroup for women with PND, and an early intervention program for children with severe disabilities.

The playgroups work because they are a universal service that can provide a wide range of support, including for targeted families. There is no stigma in attending a playgroup, but

staff can set up the environment appropriately, can model appropriate behaviour and interactions, and use informal opportunities to share information with parents and educate them. Playgroups are a subtle intervention to support family wellbeing.

## **Supported Playgroups**

The use of supported playgroups as an intervention approach for families with young children is an increasing trend, and particularly a trend that brings together a range of service providers. The Commonwealth funds Playgroup Associations in each state and a range of playgroup strategies (FaCSIA, 2006). In addition many projects funded through the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, including Communities for Children, run supported playgroups. On a state government level Families First in NSW list supported playgroups as one of four key services offered to families (DOCS, 2003a). A quick search of the internet provides results including Steiner playgroups (Billington, 1991), playgroups run by Good Beginnings (eg Good Beginnings Australia, 2006) and playgroups run for families living in caravan parks (eg Hillan, 2002).

Playgroups can vary enormously, but the general perception of playgroups is of parents and carers with children under school age who gather on a regular basis. They offer opportunities for both children and the adults with them to socialise, have new experiences, learn and have fun ([www.playgroupaustralia.com.au](http://www.playgroupaustralia.com.au)). Community or mainstream playgroups are usually parent run and managed and one estimate is that 100 000 families access over 8 500 community playgroups across Australia (FaCSIA, 2006). Supported or facilitated playgroups are those that are organised and run by a paid coordinator, and often target families who may not normally attend playgroup (FaCSIA, 2006). Families First (DOCS, 2003b) describe supported playgroups as different from traditional playgroups as not only are they run by qualified workers but the workers provide information on parenting and other community services.

These descriptions of playgroups fit with the model of prevention and early intervention proposed by Mrazek and Haggerty (1994). Universal programs target whole population groups and community playgroups fit into this category. Selective programs are those that target a subgroup of the population where the risk of developing mental health disorders is higher than average. Supported playgroups fit into this category. For example the Communities for Children sites were selected using a range of indicators to identify disadvantaged communities (FaSCIA, 2004a) and individual supported playgroups target groups including young parents and CALD families (FaSCIA, 2006).

## **Strengths of Supported Playgroups**

Although there is little published material about playgroups, we do know that playgroup provides opportunities for children to learn through play and to socialise with other children. We also know that parents can access social support through playgroups. These are topics that are covered in the literature.

One of the strengths of supported playgroup as an intervention approach is their impact on children's development. One of the crucial tasks of early childhood is establishment of relationships with other children, however it can be a challenge for young children to play cooperatively and maintain friendships (Centre for Community Child Health, 2003). These skills are important as they set the patterns for interactions with peers in the future, and predict whether they will follow a pathway of competence or deviance in the tasks of middle childhood and adolescence (Skonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Children who can play well tend to "have well-structured experiences with peer interactions starting in toddlerhood and preschool, and, in particular, opportunities to play with familiar and compatible peers" (p 180, Skonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

The National Agenda for Early Childhood (DFaCS, 2004) states that children “need experiences in the early years that foster their social, emotional, physical, intellectual, cultural and spiritual development and well-being” (p16). These are all experiences that are available in a supported playgroup.

A further strength of supported playgroups is their impact on the social networks of parents/carers. A FaCS report (2003) found that both informal and formal networks were of assistance to parents in their role of parenting and playgroups were cited as examples of both. This report goes further to add that support networks appeared to be linked to improved parental preparedness, including coping with parental responsibilities, and parental wellbeing. Parents with “good access to information, support and services were more confident and more comfortable about their responsibilities than other parents” (p 54, FaCS, 2003).

Supported playgroups also have the potential to increase a family’s protective factors and reduce their risk factors. For example, community and cultural protective factors (DHAC, 2000) that playgroups influence include sense of connectedness, attachment to and networks within the community, participation in a community group and access to support services. Some supported playgroups have the potential to go further to improve family risk factors, particularly parenting styles, for example, discipline style, lack of warmth and affection, low involvement in child’s activities (DHAC, 2000).

## **Best practice**

What does best practice mean for us? For integrated early childhood sites it means maintaining high standards all the time and not “making do”. This also means creating evidence of best practice. We all need to document what we are doing and share that information. We need to capture what we do, what works and why we do what we do. This means that we need to make time to keep records and evaluate what we are doing. However we also need to strive for continuous improvement and constantly look for ways to improve what we are doing. This is not just our work practices, but also our promotion and record keeping.

## **Conclusion**

The message we would like readers to reflect on is that it does take time, effort and deliberative decision making to bring together a variety of service providers from different backgrounds to make a successful integrated early childhood service. It is often the details that can create an atmosphere that is welcoming and friendly and it is also the details that can de-rail what you are trying to achieve.

But we believe it is worth getting the details rights and spending the time that it takes because we, the workers, are worth it, the service is worth it and the families are worth it.

## Contact details

Judyth has also worked with many church and community groups to establish playgroups and family services on their sites over the past 20 years. She has worked as a training coordinator for Family Day Care, a Play Consultant for the Playgroup Association of SA and for the past 2 years at Seaton Central.

Joanne is currently employed by the SA Department of Education and Children's Services, working as part of a team to establish one of the new Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting in the Inner West suburb of Cowandilla. Her background is as a special education teacher, and she has also worked in several community services based on school sites, Playgroups SA, including the Playgroups in Caravan Parks Pilot project and in a reunification service.

We both have backgrounds of working with and establishing playgroups, including those that support disadvantaged families and utilise a collaborative, multi-agency approach.

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