

The changing face of parenting



**Exploring the attitudes of parents
in contemporary Australia**

Joe Tucci
Janise Mitchell
Chris Goddard



April 2005

Every Child is Important

"...Child abuse will only stop when children like me become important to everyone..."

Words of Josh, a nine year old boy who attended for counselling at the Australian Childhood Foundation to heal the hurt left by a parent who had rejected him at the age of four.

A number of important community and public health concerns have been tackled using advertising, public awareness and education campaigns, such as drink-driving and immunisation of children. The need for a primary child abuse prevention campaign is well established. Research has shown consistently that adults who were abused as children are at greater risk of suicide, self-harm, depression, drug use and alcohol addiction.

The *Every Child is Important* Program is a national universal parenting education initiative that seeks to prevent child abuse by eliciting a social commitment to children and promoting parenting confidence, knowledge and access to support.

The program seeks to promote community attitudes that acknowledge

- the developmental vulnerabilities of children;
- the meaning children give to their experiences;
- the capacities and contribution of children to the cultural and emotional life of families and communities.
- that children and parents learn and grow together; and
- that all parents need access to support and information in some form at some time.

The initiative has been funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services to be implemented nationally until the end of 2005.

The program integrates the following multimodal strategies:

- mass media advertising highlighting the key messages;
- an interactive website for parents and children's services providers (www.kidscount.com.au);
- 40 parenting seminars around Australia with well known educator, Michael Grose;
- the distribution of half a million parenting booklets;
- the production and distribution of a free Talking Book CDROM with parenting information in twelve languages;
- the distribution of a Kidscount Parenting Newsletter; and,
- community attitude tracking research about children and parenting.

About the authors

Joe Tucci is the Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Childhood Foundation. He is a social worker and registered psychologist. He has extensive experience in child protection, child and family therapy and child welfare research over the past sixteen years. He has recently completed a doctoral thesis exploring the issues of child emotional and psychological abuse. He is a guest lecturer in child abuse and family therapy at Deakin and Monash University. He is also a member of the Australian Council for Children and Parenting. He can be contacted by email at jtucci@childhood.org.au.

Janise Mitchell is a social worker and Manager of Education and Prevention Programs at the Australian Childhood Foundation. She has extensive experience in child protection, high risk adolescents and public policy analysis and the provision of consultancy to individuals and organisations on a range of issues including practice and program development and review. She is also responsible for the development and implementation of national child abuse prevention programs and is currently completing a Masters degree exploring the social construction of childhood. She can be contacted by email at jmitchell@childhood.org.au.

Professor Chris Goddard is the Director of the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Head of the Department of Social Work, Monash University. He has undertaken extensive research into child abuse and family violence. He has published widely in academic journals and has written for the broader media. His most recent books include *Child Abuse and Child Protection: A Guide for Health, Education and Welfare Workers*, (Churchill Livingstone 1998), and *Responding to Children* (Longmans, 1993). A further book with Janet Stanley entitled *In the Firing Line* (Wiley, UK) was published in 2002. He can be contacted by email at Chris.Goddard@med.monash.edu.au.

Australian Childhood Foundation

The **Australian Childhood Foundation** (formerly known as Australians Against Child Abuse) is an independent children's charity working in a number of ways to prevent child abuse and reduce the harm it causes to children, families and the community.

- **Counselling.** We provide a range of specialist counselling services for children and young people affected by abuse and for their families.
- **Advocacy for children.** We speak out for effective protective and support services for children and young people. All our programs affirm the importance of children.
- **Education.** We provide community and professional education, consultancy and debriefing programs. These programs aim to improve responses to children and young people who have experienced or are at risk of abuse, family violence and neglect.
- **Child abuse prevention programs.** We run nationally recognised child abuse prevention programs that seek to decrease the incidence of child abuse and raise awareness about how to stop it even before it starts.
- **Inspiring and supporting parents.** We provide ongoing parenting education seminars and easily accessible resources to strengthen the ability of parents to raise happy and confident children.
- **Research.** In partnership with Monash University, we have established the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse to research the problem of child abuse and identify constructive solutions.

The Australian Childhood Foundation won the 1998 National and State Violence Prevention Awards for its efforts to prevent child abuse.

The Australian Childhood Foundation relies on the support of the community to enable it to continue its programs and services.

The Helen Macpherson Smith Trust is a major supporter of the Australian Childhood Foundation in Victoria.



PO BOX 525
Ringwood VIC 3134

Phone: (03) 9874 3922
Facsimile: (03) 9874 7922
Website: www.childhood.org.au

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National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse, Monash University

The National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse was established as a joint initiative between the Australian Childhood Foundation and the Department of Social Work at Monash University. The Research Centre is part of the School of Primary Health Care, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University.

Major goals of the Research Centre include the generation and dissemination of research findings and the stimulation of discussion about issues in child abuse and child protection (See Appendix A).

Professor Chris Goddard is the Director of the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse, Monash University.

The research partnership between the Australian Childhood Foundation and Monash University has a proven track record. Over the past 5 years, it has received support for major projects such as

- listening to children's feedback about protective, therapeutic and support services;
- understanding the impact of emotional and psychological abuse on children;
- analysing the descriptions of child abuse and childhood by the media;
- investigating the impact of mandatory reporting on professional decisions to report child abuse;
- contributing to an understanding of the connections between different forms of family violence; and,
- examining community attitudes towards the prevention of child abuse and family violence.

The partnership has also been extremely successful in gaining positive media coverage for its research findings about critical child welfare issues.

Enquiries about the work of the Research Centre can be made through the following contact.

Professor Chris Goddard
Director
National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse
Monash University
PO BOX 197 Caulfield East VIC 3145
Phone: (03) 9903 1120 Fax: (03) 9903 1141

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Secondly, *Van Morrison* and *Rod Stewart* were very generous to donate the use of the song “*Have I told you lately that I love you*”. Advertising expert, Charles Maynard and media placement company, *Starcom*, have been central to the development of the advertising component of the program.

Universal Music and *Warner Music* were enthusiastic and supportive of the program. A seed grant from the *Helen Macpherson Smith Trust* ensured that the campaign was able to bring together so many of the important elements central to community awareness and education.

Popular entertainer, *Tracy Bartram*, is the patron of the program and has continued to lend her considerable support to achieving its aims.

Thinking.com has supported our work by developing a new website for the program and the organisation.

The Pro-Bono Committee of the legal firm *Herbert Geer and Rundle* have also formed a partnership with the Australian Childhood Foundation to support and promote the work of the organisation. We also appreciate the contribution of *Storm Image Design*, *Rothfield Print Management*, *Velvet Monkeys*, *Horizon Films*, *Horizon Communications* and *SBS Radio*. *LOTE Marketing* have also provided their expertise in implementing a multicultural element of the campaign.

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QUANTUM
MARKET RESEARCH

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Understanding the changing face of parenting

It is commonplace to hear parents talk about the changing world in which their children are developing. Over the years, parents of every generation have reflected on the significant or, at least, evolving differences in attitudes and approaches towards children and parenting. Similarly, parents have been concerned about the impact of external forces such as local and world events on the lives of their children and their futures.

The critical role of parents in child rearing has been the subject of much debate and, at times, controversy over recent decades. The perceived value of parenting has come under challenge in a society beset by competing demands. No more so has this been highlighted than by the ongoing public discourse surrounding 'stay at home' parents and the work and family balance.

Families, today, exist in a rapidly changing environment. Parents are faced with the challenge of keeping pace with and navigating this environment on behalf of their children. Childhood, family life and community life are all subject to significant transformation in contemporary social and economic settings. What remains constant, however, is the reliance of children on their parents to care for them, provide for them and keep them safe from harm.

It is in this context that the Australian Childhood Foundation, in conjunction with the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse at Monash University, commissioned Quantum Market Research to undertake a series of national attitudinal surveys exploring issues of concern to parents in their efforts to raise their children whilst responding to the pressures and demands of modern living.

This study is part of a series of ongoing attitudinal research seeking to develop insights into the needs of parents for support and information. The outcomes of the research will form the basis for the ongoing evolution of the **Every Child is Important** Program in addition to informing the development of effective policy and program development aimed at better meeting the needs of parents and children.

Aims of research

The key objectives of this research were to

- identify the issues of most concern to contemporary parents in relation to their parenting;
- explore changing parenting attitudes and practices over time;
- examine the extent to which parents feel resourced in their parenting approaches; and
- develop a basis for informing the evolution of public policy which addresses the support and educational needs of parents.

Survey method

A representative sample of 501 parents in Australia was interviewed by phone in April 2005. The composition and background of the sample are detailed in the table below.

Survey sample

All the parents in the survey had at least one child under the age of 18 living with them at home. The largest sub group consisted of parents with at least one child between 4 and 10 years of age. The majority of respondents to the survey were mothers (77%). A significant proportion of parents interviewed were in current relationships with a partner (70%). There was an equal distribution of surveys conducted across Australian states.

Total Sample	501	%
Gender		
Male	116	23
Female	385	77
Marital Status		
Married/de facto	351	70
Single/widowed/divorced	150	30
Children living at home		
0-3 years of age	179	
4-10 years of age	283	
11-18 years of age	218	
Location		
Victoria	85	17
New South Wales	86	17
Queensland	85	17
South Australia	81	16
Western Australia	83	17
Tasmania	81	17

Critical findings

The following tables summarise the key findings of the survey results. They are presented as a series of interconnecting themes emerging from the data.

Parents feel under pressure to ‘get parenting right’

Key Findings
The majority of parents (70%) feel a lot of community pressure to ‘get parenting right’.
Only 38% parents agree with the notion that parenting comes naturally.
The majority of parents (63%) are concerned about their level of confidence in their parenting.

The results suggest that parents are very aware of the pressure of community attitudes in establishing the expectation that they need to be always effective in their parenting role. Such attitudes can lead to parents feeling that there is a ‘right’ way to parent and that not conforming to these expectations reflects negatively on them as parents and individuals.

The majority (63%) of parents also acknowledged that they were concerned about their level of confidence as parents with many (38%) admitting that parenting does not come naturally to them. These findings reflect the authors’ previous research that reported that 56% of parents lacked confidence in their parenting (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2004).

Pressure on parents to do well in raising children who in turn are expected to succeed in school and employment may also add fear to the implications of not ‘getting it right’. In a survey of parents in 2002, Mitchell (2002) found that one in three parents believed that pressure to succeed at school and peer group expectations were among some of the biggest challenges facing children today.

It would seem that implied in the belief that parents need to ‘get it right’ is an awareness by parents of the potentially detrimental consequences for their children and themselves if they, as parents, fail.

Critically, these findings appear to reflect the importance of recognising and challenging prevailing community attitudes regarding parenting. In recent years, there appears to have been increasing community and media attention given to the personal and emotional cost of parenting. For example, Warren and Warren Tyagi (2003) have argued that having a child in the USA is now the best indicator of whether someone will end up in financial collapse. Couples with children are twice as likely as childless couples to file for bankruptcy. They are also seventy-five per cent more likely to be late paying their bills. They are far more likely to face bank foreclosing mortgages on their homes.

Similarly, there is a growing movement in favour of creating “child free zones” with websites such as www.childfree.com.au promoting policies for individuals who have chosen not to have children. For example, on the home page of www.jenipurr.com/kidfree, you can identify your choice to be child free by identifying with any or all of the following statements.

- Do you like kids just fine as long as they belong to someone *else*?

- Do you love being an Aunt or Uncle (honorary or otherwise), because we know we don't have to keep 'em?
- Do you prefer our 'children' to have more than two legs?

Such examples communicate an emerging backlash against parenting and children. They further serve to isolate parents from connections that may support them and blame them for any difficulties they may experience.

There is an urgent need for programs that seek to promote more supportive community attitudes about the task of parenting with the hope that parents can come to feel more supported and valued in their role.

Fear of criticism acts as a barrier to parents asking for support in times of difficulty

Key Findings

Nearly one quarter (24%) of parents interviewed feel they will be negatively judged by others if they admit to having problems with their parenting.

The perceived weight of community expectation on parents to 'get it right' in regard to their parenting appears to act as a disincentive for a significant number of parents who may struggle to meet the developmental needs of their children. Mirroring the findings of previous research (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2004; de Hoogd et al, 2003), there is clearly a significant proportion of the parenting community who feel unable to access important support in times of difficulty for fear of being judged to be failing as a parent.

The implications of these consistent findings suggest the need for a range of strategies that both target commonplace attitudes that act as barriers to parents engaging in help seeking behaviour, and facilitate the promotion of messages in the community that acknowledge that all parents need access to support and information at some stage in their parenting career. The decision of parents to request resources and information needs to be removed of any stigma if available supports, both informal and formal, are to be effective in assisting families under stress.

Parents say children today are growing up too fast

Key Findings

Most parents (85%) believe children today are growing up too fast.

Parents (80%) are worried about their children's futures.

Overwhelmingly, parents feel that childhood is shrinking and that children are growing up too fast in today's society. A large majority are actively concerned about their children's future.

It would seem that for many parents the sources of anxiety about their children are primarily focussed in the environment outside the family. It appears that such concerns are fuelled by the pace of change in contemporary living, the increasing expansion of technology that bring the adult world to children in ways not previously possible and the perception of real threats to children's safety both on the internationally and in their local communities.

Further, for the majority of parents struggling to find a balance between work and family, they are conscious of the lack of time available to them to connect with their children's experience of their world. For some parents, this may lead them to feel out of step with their children's growing interests and focus of activities.

Marketing directly to children puts added pressure on parents

Key Findings

The significant majority of parents (90%) believe that children are targeted too much by companies trying to market their products to them.

Compounding the sense that children are growing up too fast and potentially adding to the financial pressures of families is the growing trend by companies to market goods directly to children as a consumer group in their own right. However, as children are consumers with limited independent disposable income, the pressure to purchase these products is often then transferred from children to parents, frequently placing strain on these relationships.

Resoundingly, the parents in this survey condemned the practice of marketing to children, deeming it excessive.

The costs of raising children is a significant concern for parents

Key Findings

Nearly three quarters (74%) of parents reported that the expense of raising children was a significant concern to them.

The majority of parents surveyed report experiencing additional pressure in regard to the financial costs of raising their children, adding further stress to their efforts to meet the demands of work and family life. This finding is a significant increase on those of an earlier study in which only 20% of parents surveyed indicated the cost of raising children was a challenge for them (Mitchell, 2002).

Whilst the disparity in these two findings may be due to sampling differences between the studies, it may also suggest that in more recent years families are experiencing substantially more financial pressures.

With many parents forced to work additional hours to meet their financial obligations, the stress this causes is often readily transferred into family life, possibly further disrupting their capacity and confidence to parent.

Balancing work and family continues to put parents in a bind

Key Findings

3 out of 4 parents believed that balancing work and family is a serious issue for them.

Over a third (37%) of parents feel like they do not spend enough time with their children.

The issue of working parents attempting to balance the needs of work and family is not new and this study serves only to confirm the ongoing and as yet unresolved dilemma for families today. Substantiating earlier findings (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2004) that suggested this was a significant issue facing the vast majority of families surveyed (75%), this study again shows the numbers of families in this bind to be at the same level.

Concerningly, more than a third of parents felt they were not spending enough time with their children. This is in contrast to other key findings in this study which highlight the significance parents place on spending time with their children as an important strategy for building positive relationships with their children, shaping their children's behaviour and role modelling.

This result in particular would suggest that efforts in recent years towards the development of more family friendly work practices on the part of employers are yet to show any widespread effect on the majority of families.

Parents are turning to technology to keep in touch with their children

Key Findings

Nearly 1 in 3 parents (31%) believed that mobile phones have strengthened communication between themselves and their children.

The role of the mobile phone in family life is assuming greater importance as, in this study, it is attributed with strengthening the capacity of parents and children to communicate with each other.

This finding is suggestive of families seeking alternate ways to stay connected with each other in the face of limited opportunities to spend time together. Similarly, this result may also be reflective of the growing sense of anxiety that parents have about the safety of their children outside of the home, as suggested in the table set out on the next page. In this situation, the mobile phone serves to alleviate parental concern about their children's wellbeing when they are away from their immediate ability to protect them directly.

Parents are concerned about protecting their children in an uncertain world

Key Findings

Many parents (60%) are worried about the exposure of their children to world events in the media such as terrorism, war and disasters.

More than three quarters of parents (78%) are very concerned about the potential for their children to be exploited when they use the internet.

Nearly two thirds of parents (63%) believe regulating what their children are exposed to via the television is a serious concern for them.

The majority of parents (86%) are significantly concerned about the need to protect their children from potential sexual abuse by an adult.

The majority of parents (80%) are seriously concerned about the need to protect their children from bullying at school.

The world today, both locally and internationally, is the source of much anxiety for parents as they struggle to ensure their children remain protected from the trauma of far away events and the more immediate and local threats that exist in their own neighborhoods.

In recent years, the mass media, in particular television, has increasingly saturated their broadcasting with reports on terrorism, wars and natural disasters in real time. As such, it is almost impossible to shield children from the associated violence and distressing images entering family homes every day. The trauma and stress caused to children as a result of witnessing events such as the attack on the World Trade Centre or the more recent hostage situation involving children in Belsen is also well documented in the media. The challenge for parents then becomes one of attempting to limit the exposure of their children to such events as well as respond to the needs of children who may be displaying symptoms of fear, anxiety or distress in the face of inevitable exposure.

More recent local media reporting about the risks to children from paedophiles both on the internet and in their schools and local communities has heightened parental anxiety as to the safety of their children and increased the sense of vigilance they must exercise.

Parents rely on how they were raised to parent their own children but they are looking for other sources of support

Key Findings

Two thirds of parents (66%) believed that the way they were raised by their own parents was very influential in their parenting today.

More than one third of parents (39%) reported being very influenced in their parenting by contact they have with their child's school, preschool, child care centre or playgroup.

Many parents (34%) are heavily influenced by community norms in their parenting.

1 in 5 parents report reading parenting information to be very influential in their parenting.

1 in 5 parents indicated that attendance at parenting information sessions/groups to be very influential in their parenting approach.

It is not surprising that the majority of parents (66%) are heavily influenced by approaches used by their own parents. These findings mirror previous research by the authors that found that 47% of parents in the survey sought support about their parenting from extended family members (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2004; de Hoogd, Mitchell and Tucci, 2003).

These findings also suggest that a heavy reliance on parenting approaches used by our own parents may leave contemporary parents ill-equipped to confront the complex array of challenges faced by children and families in today's world.

The findings indicate that parents are beginning to recognise the need to resource themselves through other avenues and are turning to accessible points of support such as their child's school or gaining information through available parenting publications.

Of interest in these findings is the significant role played in family life by schools, preschools, child care centres and playgroups. The universality of these settings, in addition to the capacity of these contact points to reach the majority of families with young children renders them as potentially efficient and effective mechanisms for the widespread dissemination of parenting information and support.

Parents use a range of strategies to teach children right from wrong

Key Findings	n=501	%
Making children feel loved	496	99
Spending time with children	492	98
Parents setting a good example	491	98
Rewarding good behaviour	409	82
Reasoning with children	390	78
Time out	268	53
Creating a diversion	229	46
Grounding children	191	38
Smacking a child	21	4

*Respondents were able to give more than one answer.

Previous research conducted by the authors (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard 2004) showed that parents were interested in reviewing and exploring a variety of ways to discipline children, with 58% of parents in the survey indicating that finding the right approach to discipline was a serious issue for them. The results of this study further support this contention and highlight the range of strategies parents are currently in favour of utilising.

Parents are less inclined to resort to physical punishment to teach children right from wrong

Key Findings	n=501	%
Very important strategy	21	4
A little important as a strategy	182	36
Not at all important as a strategy	290	58
Don't know	8	2

Contrary to the often portrayed view that physical punishment of children is critical to effective discipline, the results of this study show a significant move away from physical punishment as a strategy used by parents in teaching children right from wrong. In their study of community attitudes towards smacking, Tucci, Goddard and Saunders (2002) found only minimal support for "smacking" when it was aimed at young children and almost no support for the use of implements, such as wooden spoons, in physically punishing children. The findings of this study further supports the continuation of this trend away from using smacking as a means of shaping children's behaviour.

Talking to children about sex causes discomfort for some parents

Key Findings

1 in 5 parents indicated that talking to their child about sex is one area of their parenting they do not feel confident about.

3 in 4 parents believe that sex education is the responsibility of parents and schools.

The task of educating children about sex and sexuality has long been debated as to the appropriateness of the age of the child to receive such information, the role of schools versus parents in the provision of information and the level of detail children should be given at different stages of development. Added to this is the extent to which parents feel comfortable to address these issues with their children.

This study clearly shows that a significant number of parents lack confidence in discussing sex and sexuality with their children. This is an aspect of parenting around which many parents appear to require support and information to enable them to confidently and effectively address their children's needs for timely and accurate information in an open and honest way.

These findings also suggest the need for the urgent support of parents to provide them with knowledge and skills to communicate with their children about sex and sexuality. Earlier findings in this study highlighted the substantial level of concern by parents for the potential risks their children face from adults who may sexually abuse them either via the internet or within their own communities. If parents are unable to create an environment of openness and honesty about sex and sexuality with their children, they risk fostering an environment in which their children may feel unable to disclose experiences they have about abusive sexual behaviour of others, including adults, towards them. Such an environment has the potent to leave children unprotected and at ongoing risk of sexual abuse or exploitation.

Parents in this study are clearly welcoming of the role of schools in educating children and young people about sex and sexuality viewing it as an important source of support for parents in addressing these issues with their children.

The majority of parents want more information about how to improve their relationships with their child

Key Findings

78% of the parents interviewed wanted more information about how to improve their relationships with their children.

Strongly supporting previous research by the authors (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2004), this study confirms that the overwhelming majority of parents want more information on fostering positive relationships with their children. This finding is also consistent with the study by de Hoogd, Mitchell, and Tucci (2003) in which the outcomes of a sample of 1500 Australian parents showed that they wanted more than situation specific knowledge about how to manage and respond to difficulties caused by children in their family. Instead, they preferred opportunities to reflect on and develop communication approaches that enhanced the quality of the relationship between them and their children.

The findings in this current study validate the outcomes of previous research that highlighted that parents perceived positive attachments and good relationships as their highest priority in raising children (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2004).

Analysis

The changing face of childhood

The results of this national study of parents confirm previous research which has pointed to a growing sense amongst parents that childhood is at risk because the daily environment in which children live is perceived to be increasingly less safe, stable and predictable (Jackson and Scott, 1999; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2004; Mitchell, 2004).

The outcomes of this study also suggest an overwhelming concern amongst parents that children are growing up too fast and indeed childhood itself is quickly disappearing. Parents in the sample surveyed were aware that children are no longer as easily shielded from a range of social and political issues historically province of adulthood. Parents were strongly opposed to the practice of marketing products directly to children. These findings also support other studies which have highlighted that children are being rushed into the adult world at an early age (Ochiltree, 1991; Postman, 1994; Mitchell, 2004).

The results of this study support the notion that the intrusion of a highly visible and increasingly accessible adult world seems to undermine parental ability and confidence to care for children and, in some ways, protect childhood itself.

The changing face of parenting

Reflecting the findings of earlier studies, the parents in this survey communicated a significant understanding of the fundamental need for their children to experience love and nurturing parent-child relationships (Mitchell, 2002; Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2003; de Hoogd, Mitchell and Tucci, 2003; Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2004).

The parents who took part in the survey also demonstrated an acute awareness of the importance of dedicating time to relationships with their children and the potential risks to the wellbeing of their children and family life should they not do so. With the majority of Australian children living in either two parent, dual income households or single parent employed households, issues of work and family balance remain critical to the daily reality of Australian parents (Buchanan and Thornthwaite, 2001).

Increasing workforce participation by women and the consequent impact on time spent with children has been identified as a major stress for working mothers (Russell and Bowman, 2000) and jeopardises traditional ways many families have achieved a work and family balance. Historically, families have relied on “stay at home” mothers or mothers engaged in part time employment in achieving such a balance (Hand and Tudball, 2001).

The potential negative effects of parental work commitments on children, parents and families are often summarised as time “squeeze”, role overload stress and the deterioration of parent-child or marital relationships (Millward, 2002). In research seeking views from children and parents about the effect of work on family life, Lewis, Hand and Tudball (2001) found that time spent at work was but one of a complex interplay of work related issues impacting on relationships between children and parents. Other factors included flexibility of work hours to be responsive to family needs, sharing of activities and being able to maintain important family routines and rituals.

The findings in this study suggest that the implementation of more family-friendly employment practices has not yet achieved a broad base and remains limited in its impact for many families.

Importantly, this study indicated that parents are open to reviewing their parenting approach in an effort to build and maintain relationships with their children. These relationships are viewed as critical anchor points for parents and children as they confront and navigate a rapidly changing and often uncertain world.

The extent to which the media is bringing issues such as drugs, paedophilia, terrorism and violence into family homes is unprecedented. Parents are looking for ways to support, talk to and protect their children from what is most often portrayed as a hostile and unfriendly world for children. They are also recognising that relying on their own experiences of being parented as children may not fully equip them in the task of parenting their children in a contemporary context. Parental anxieties about the need to protect and support children in the face of these issues are high. Resourcing parents to succeed in this task is critical for the future wellbeing of children.

Parents are clearly asking for more information about strengthening relationships with their children. In this and other studies (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2004; de Hoogd, Mitchell and Tucci, 2003), the overwhelming need for parents is information and support to develop better relationships with their children. This is a need that remains effectively unmet. It has been argued for some time now that most available parenting information and support focus largely on behaviour management issues at the expense of the promotion of building relationships between parents and children (McGurk, 1996; Allen, 1997).

Indeed, the growing plethora of popular media programs about parenting serves only to confirm this. In this context, parenting is often viewed through the lens of “out of control” children and parental impotence to stop the behaviour. Consistent portrayals of parenting in this light does little to serve the critically high needs of parents for support with relationships. According to the results of this study, a stronger emphasis on parent-child relationships in the provision of parenting information is more likely to be effective in strengthening the confidence of parents.

The need to enhance community support for parenting

The context for many Australian parents appears to remain largely unsupportive. Community attitudes and expectations have a profound impact on parenting and family life. As this study shows, many prevailing ideas and practices work against the interests of parents and families.

Alarming, in this study, 70% of parents reported experiencing significant community pressure to ‘get parenting right’ and a third of parents indicated that community norms were very influential in their parenting. This outcome may point to the trend identified in other research that parenting is becoming more and more an individualised activity disconnected from the collective support of extended families and friends. For example, Ochiltree and Edgar (1995) have argued that child rearing is increasingly taking place in an unsupportive context in modern society, mirroring the dominant philosophy of private parenting responsibility. With the breakdown or geographic dispersion of many extended family networks, many families are left without ready avenues of support.

It should not be not surprising then that parents find it difficult to seek out support if they are in trouble. One in five parents in this study stated that they would not request help for fear of being negatively judged and criticised. In a previous survey, a similar proportion of parents expressed this concern (Tucci, Goddard and Mitchell, 2004). Such beliefs act as significant deterrents to seeking timely and effective support.

If this finding is analysed in the context of the need identified by parents in this and previous research for affirmation and confidence about their parenting (Tucci, Goddard and Mitchell, 2004; de Hoogd, Mitchell and Tucci, 2003), it becomes quickly apparent that many families may well feel trapped in an unsupportive context. Many parents report feeling alone and isolated in their parenting and desire opportunities to share parenting experiences and concerns (de Hoogd, Mitchell and Tucci, 2003). Further support for this theme has been proposed by Allen and Schulz (1987) in their research that suggested that resources for parents should be targeted at the promotion of self belief and self confidence in parenting.

In reality, all parents need access to support and information at some time in their parenting career. How, when and if they seek that support is determined by a complex matrix of factors. If, as a society, we are to effectively support families we must find ways of doing so that are non-stigmatising, easily accessible and relevant. Allen (1997) noted the importance of ensuring availability of information and support for parents. But even if resources were to be made more widely available, it would appear from the findings of the current study that community attitudes also need to change in order for parents to not feel stigmatised and rendered vulnerable in seeking out such support.

We and others have long argued that the promotion of help seeking behaviour in parents is absolutely critical for the health and wellbeing of children (Tomison 1998; Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2003; Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard 2004). This research adds even greater weight to the need for building effective public policy that aims to achieve widespread community attitude and behaviour change via the utilisation of whole of population approaches based on health promotion models (Zubrick et al 2000, NSW Child Protection Council 1995; Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard 2004).

Conclusion

Parents appear to be struggling to keep pace with the changing world experienced by their children. They feel under pressure to not fail their children. They struggle to find the time to spend with their children, even though they recognise the importance of doing so. They feel worried for their children now and into the future. They are concerned about a number of external threats to their safety and healthy development.

In all of this, parents seem to be emerging from the influence of their own experiences of being parented to seek out more up to date information and resources aimed specifically at helping them to develop positive relationships with their children.

For all parents, it is imperative that as a community we find ways to connect with them, support them and encourage their self reflection and learning. By doing so, we will undoubtedly improve the quality of the relationships between parents and their children, and in turn enhance the developmental outcomes for all children.

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Appendix A.

Publications from the Australian Childhood Foundation and the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse at Monash University.

Victoria's Protective Services: Dual Tracks and Double Standards Goddard, C. (February, 1988)	\$20.00
Agenda For Change. Solutions to the Problems in Child Protection Systems in Australia. Tucci, J., Goddard, C., Saunders, B., Stanley, J. (September, 1998)	\$20.00
Agenda For Change. Selected Conference Papers. Edited by Tucci, J., Goddard, C., Saunders, B., Stanley, J. (June, 1999)	\$20.00
Why do We Condone the Physical Punishment of Children? Saunders, B. and Goddard, C.R. (June, 1999)	\$20.00
A Critique of Structured Risk Assessment Procedures: Instruments of Abuse? Saunders, B. and Goddard, C.R. (June, 1998)	\$20.00
More Action – Less Talk! Community Responses to Child Abuse Prevention. Tucci, J., Goddard, C.R. and Mitchell, J. (March 2001)	\$20.00
A Study in Confusion – Factors which affect the decisions of community professionals when reporting child abuse and neglect. Goddard, C.R., Saunders, B., Stanley, J. and Tucci, J. (February, 2002)	\$20.00
Please Don't Hit Me – Community Attitudes towards the “Physical Discipline” of Children. Tucci, J., Saunders, B., and Goddard, C.R. (June, 2002)	\$20.00
In the Firing Line: Violence and Power in Child Protection Work Stanley, J. and Goddard, C.R. (2002). Published by Wiley.	\$20.00
Tolerating violence against children: Community attitudes about child abuse and child protection. Tucci, J., Mitchell, J. and Goddard, C. (September, 2003).	\$20.00
The concerns of Australian parents. Tucci, J., Mitchell, J. and Goddard, C. (March, 2004).	\$20.00
Do Not Turn Away: Tracking Tasmanian community attitudes about child abuse and child protection Tucci, J., Mitchell, J. and Goddard, C. (May, 2004).	\$20.00
Australian Childhood Foundation Quarterly Newsletter 12 month subscription Edited by Janise Mitchell	\$20.00

All prices include GST and postage and handling. To order, contact Janice McLean, Administrative Officer at the Australian Childhood Foundation on (03) 9874 3922.

Appendix B.

A summary of the *Every Child is Important* Program.

Every Child is Important

A national parenting education initiative

Register for regular updates about parenting at www.kidscount.com.au

Order free resources or register for a parenting seminar by phone on 1800 176 453

Order free resources or register for a parenting seminar by returning the form on back



The *Every Child is Important* Program is a new national universal parenting education initiative aiming to elicit a social commitment to children. It aims to promote parenting confidence, knowledge and access to support. It has been developed by the Australian Childhood Foundation and funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services.

The key elements of the program include

- TV, radio and print advertising featuring the Van Morrison song “Have I told you lately that I love you”
- Outcomes of regular national surveys about parenting and children
- Free parenting resource material focused on promoting positive relationships between children and adults
- An interactive website at kidscount.com.au
- The release of a new “Talking Book” CDROM with parenting information in twelve languages
- 40 parenting seminars around Australia with popular educator Michael Grose
- Free parenting booklet
- Free Every Child is Important Parenting Newsletter
- Updates about research on child development and parenting
- Promotion of local parenting activities and support services

Registration and Order Form

Please complete form and fax back to (03) 9874 7922

Your details

Name:

Position:

Organisation:

Address:

State:

Postcode:

Register your interest and order free parenting resources

- I would like to register to receive regular updates of activities, newsletters and material from the *Every Child is Important* Program.
- I would like to order _____ copies of the *Every Child is Important Parenting Education Booklets*. The booklets are **free**.
- I would like to order _____ copies of the *Talking Book for Parents from Many Backgrounds* (CDROM) that includes both audio and downloadable print versions of the parenting booklet in twelve languages. The Talking Book CDROM is **free**.
- I would like to order _____ copies of the free *Every Child is Important* poster.

About the Australian Childhood Foundation

The Australian Childhood Foundation is an independent children's charity committed to preventing child abuse and reducing the harm it causes to children, families and the community. It runs specialist counselling programs for children who have experienced abuse and family violence; implements nationally recognised child abuse community awareness and prevention campaigns; provides training for health, welfare and education professionals; and, conducts collaborative research in partnership with the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse at Monash University. It won the State and National Violence Prevention Award in 1998 for its efforts to prevent child sexual abuse.

Registration options

Fax completed form to (03) 9874 7922 or complete form and return to
Australian Childhood Foundation PO BOX 525 Ringwood VIC 3134

www.kidscount.com.au