Parents' Participation in Child Protection Practice: Toward Respect and Inclusion

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In this article, we focus on parents' opportunities for, and experiences of, participation in child protection decision making in Queensland, Australia. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of 10 interviews with parents who have children 0–8 years of age and who have been subject to child protection investigation, we examine parents' perceptions of the process. Parents reported a range of difficulties in interactions with practitioners, including family-related and systemic factors; the most common grievances involved poor communication practices and negative worker attitudes, which created further disengagement. Conversely, interactions involving a willingness to listen, support, and provide for goal-focused plans were seen as facilitating positive outcomes. Taking into account the case complexity and interrelationships between workers' and clients' attitudes and behaviours, we discuss strategies for promoting parents' participation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Specific practice skills required for child protection caseworkers can enhance the participation of parents in child protection decision making.

- It is critical that child protection service systems recognize parents as rights bearing citizens who have a right to participate in decisions affecting their families.

Parents have an ambivalent status as participants in child protection decision making due to their dual position as service users and as subjects of investigation. In Anglophone countries such as the United States and Australia, a *child protection* approach that focuses on protecting "children from harm in their own homes" underpins the provision of child protection services (Cameron & Freymond, 2006, p. 5). This approach contrasts markedly with the *family services* approach found in Scandinavia and in some European nations, where the state has a responsibility to intervene early and in a supportive manner to assist vulnerable families as well as to protect children from harm in their homes (Cameron & Freymond). The child protection approach promotes an individualistic view of children's needs and rights, which can contribute to ambivalence about the recognition of the rights of parents to participate in child protection decision making (see also Parton, 2006; Scott & O'Neil, 1996; Thorpe, 2008).

Despite ambivalence toward parents as participants in child protection decision making, such participation is integral to contemporary governance ideals regarding citizens' rights to participate in decisions that affect them (Wright, Turner, Clay, & Mills, 2006). Recognition of the rights of parents to participate in child protection decision making is also consistent with the autonomy and protection of the family unit upheld by the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (United Nations, 1966). Further, involving parents in decisions that affect them has benefits both for the process itself, by ensuring that parents' knowledge is included in decision making (see Thorpe, 2008), and for outcomes, such as increased compliance with case plans and enhancing options for family restoration (see Dale, 2004; Thorpe; Thomson & Thorpe, 2003). In this article we present findings from our study into parents' experiences of inclusion and exclusion in child protection decision making, and we discuss the implications of these findings for increasing their participation in child protection decision making.

Research on Parents' Experiences

A variety of methods have been used to investigate parents' experiences of interaction with child protection caseworkers. Some studies have conducted interviews with practitioners (Hernandez, Robson, & Sampson, 2008), interviews with parents (Dale, 2004; Dumbrill, 2005; Hardy & Darlington, 2008), or focus groups with parents (Kapp & Propp, 2002). Others have been based on an analysis of assessment reports (Budd, Poindexter, Felix, & Naik-Polan, 2001), verbal exchanges in case conferences (Hall & Slembrouck, 2001), or interactions between practitioners and actors in the role of service users (Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, & Hughes, 2008).

These varied methods have yielded a consistent body of findings regarding parents' experiences. Despite increased awareness of the benefits of involving parents in child protection practice, research with parents has documented widespread perceptions of exclusion and powerlessness (Kapp & Propp, 2002; Thorpe, 2008). Broadly speaking, key issues running through these studies are that interactions tend to be adversarial, with parents being placed in a position of having to respond to the case that has been made (Hall & Slembrouck, 2001; Thomson & Thorpe, 2004), and practitioners tend to focus on parents' weaknesses, paying little attention to their caregiving qualities or child-rearing competence (Budd et al., 2001). More specific themes emerged from focus groups of parents conducted in the United States (Kapp & Propp). In this study, dominant themes of parents' experiences as consumers of services were communication problems (lack of or inconsistent communication from workers), low availability (problems related to worker turnover and worker overload), disrespect (feeling a lack of respect from workers), lack of involvement (feeling left out of decision making and planning), and lack of rights (feeling helpless, confused, and lacking knowledge of the system).

Although researchers have used different terms to describe the features of parents' experiences, the five themes reported by Kapp and Propp (2002) are consistent with other studies. For example, problems with communication and availability of caseworkers have been noted

by Thorpe (2008), who found that failure to follow through on decisions and promises, together with lack of common courtesies (such as returning phone calls), tended to create a lack of trust. Thorpe also found that some parents reported feeling a lack of respect, perceiving workers as judging them or treating them in demeaning ways. Lack of respect may also be evident in judgmental attitudes such as "parent blaming" (Hansen & Ainsworth, 2007). Collectively, these themes also fit with evidence that some child protection practitioners show limited communication skills relevant to building an effective working relationship with clients by, for example, asking too many closed questions and demonstrating low levels of empathy (Forrester et al., 2008). They are also consistent with reports that parents value an "engaging" style on the part of practitioners; this style includes specific communication skills, such as listening carefully and communicating clearly, as well as showing a caring attitude (Dale, 2004; Maiter, Palmer, & Manji, 2006).

The remaining themes discussed by Kapp and Propp (2002)—lack of involvement and lack of rights—focus on the issue of power and are also supported by other research. Thorpe (2008) noted that a frequently cited grievance on the part of parents is that they lack power, and that any participation is only token in nature. Further, in-depth qualitative interviews with parents show that they perceive that child protection services are much more powerful than themselves (Dumbrill, 2005). Although this power can be used in a positive way, as a form of support, it is often seen as being used in a penalizing and coercive manner, which impedes the development of genuine collaborative relationships.

There is substantial evidence that some practitioners struggle to develop supportive and trusting relationships with parents, and that this difficulty is due in part to the pressures of their statutory child care responsibilities (Stanley, Penhale, Riordan, Barbour, & Holden, 2003; Thomson & Thorpe, 2004). As several authors have discussed, the different power bases of parents and child protection officials, and dilemmas regarding conflicting needs of parents and children, also make it difficult for practitioners to work in partnership with parents (see Dumbrill, 2005; Sinclair & Grimshaw, 1997). Also, Healy (1998) has argued that in addition to power dynamics of child protection work, factors pertaining to the life experience of the parents (such as a history of social and economic deprivation or prior negative involvement with statutory authorities) and factors related to practitioners' practices (such as a reluctance to relinquish their position of status and power and the associated attitudes of defensiveness and detachment) may create obstacles to partnership.

The changing characteristics of the child protection workforce in some Anglophone countries may also present a barrier to parent participation and needs to be borne in mind as a factor shaping parents' experiences of child protection services. In Queensland, Australia (where the study reported in this article was undertaken), the Department of Child Safety, now known as Child Safety Services, has committed to "broadening" the child protection workforce (Department of Child Safety, 2007, p. 6). Traditionally, the child protection authority has preferred to employ human service professionals with specialized knowledge of child and family welfare issues, such as professional social workers and graduates of behavioural studies programs. However, Child Safety Services now seeks practitioners from a range of disciplines, from criminology to occupational health and safety, and to occupations such as policing, on the grounds that this diversity "may add valuable skills to the Department" (Department of Child Safety, p. 6). This diverse qualification base is important for understanding the evolving practice context where many practitioners may have no background in professional communication in human welfare services, human development, or human services ethics. This is significant in that prior studies of parent satisfaction with the child protection services have indicated that caseworker's communication skills, capacity to demonstrate empathy, and communicate humane values, such as acceptance, are central to forming effective working relationships with parents (Forrester et al., 2008; Maiter et al., 2006). However, because of the lack of registration for professional social workers in Australia, there are no reliable data about the proportion of professionally qualified social workers working in either governmental or nongovernmental child protection or family support agencies in that country. It is important, then, for readers to be aware that when respondents to our study refer to caseworkers, they may not be referring to practitioners with social work or other human service qualifications.

Method

We turn now to report on the findings from our study of young families' participation in decision making in child welfare services, conducted from 2006 to 2009 in Queensland, Australia. We use the term *young families* to refer to families with children 0–8 years old. We focused on this population because they form a large proportion of the service users of child protection services, and furthermore, the representation of parents' and child's needs is especially complicated for these families, given that the developmental stage and needs of young children can prohibit their direct involvement in decision making. The major funder of the project was the Australian Research Council, with additional funding and in-kind support provided by four family and child welfare service providers (the statutory child protection authority, the state community services agency, and two nongovernmental agencies providing child and family welfare services). The project comprised three components: interviews with child advocates and direct service providers about their experience and understandings of children's and parents' participation (Stage 1), interviews with parents who had experienced substantial child protection intervention including the temporary removal of at least one child (Stage 2), and observations of family group meetings (Stage 3). The data discussed in this article are based on the interviews with parents in Stage 2 of the research.

The study occurred during a period of significant transition in child protection services in Queensland. Following a highly critical review of child welfare services to the state, the Queensland government established an authority in 2005, which was known from 2005–2009 as the Department of Child Safety. This Department focused entirely on the protection of children from harm in their own homes, and the government transferred responsibility for early intervention and family support services to nongovernmental agencies (Healy, 2009). In 2009, the Department of Child Safety was renamed as Child Safety Services and was incorporated within a larger government agency, the Department of Communities. Child Safety Services has responsibility for investigation and assessment of child protection concerns, while the Department of Communities also funds family support services aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect within the community. Substantially greater funds were allocated to investigation services than to early intervention and family support services. Indeed, in the period 2006–2009, during which the study was conducted, government funding of early intervention and family support services was approximately 11% of that allocated to investigation services (Healy,

2009). In the same period, the government also introduced legislation for increasing family participation in child protection decision making. This included the requirement for family group meetings to be held to develop case plans with families where a child was deemed to be in need of the care and protection of the state. Notably, then, a tension emerged between the increasingly investigative focus of child protection services in Queensland and the legislative reforms recognizing the increased rights of families to participate in child protection decision making.

Participants and Data Collection

In all, 10 interviews involving 11 parents, including 1 couple, were conducted for the study. We have treated the interview with the couple as a single interview (referred to as PA 7) because each person in the couple contributed equally to the interview, and their opinions could not be separated for the purpose of analysis. Except for the interview with the couple (PA 7), all participants in the parent interviews were mothers. The participants were recruited through our research partners, which included the statutory child protection authority (the Department of Child Safety) and the nongovernmental agencies that provided early intervention and family support services to vulnerable families. Respondents were recruited using a convenience sampling method. The inclusion criteria were that a participant must be a parent of at least one young child (aged 0–8 years) who had been the subject of a temporary removal order and was then being returned to the parent's care; be currently engaged with a child protection or family support service in relation to his or her young child; and have been involved with the service for a minimum of 3 months (to allow for consideration of established patterns of practice). All of the parents who took part in the study had some experience of the statutory child protection authority, even though not all were recruited from this source.

We acknowledge that the sample size was small; it is difficult to access these families, particularly for in-depth interviews, given the stigma associated with child protection concerns and the need to respect parents' privacy (Dale, 2004). Furthermore, ethical requirements regarding protection of clients' privacy meant that the research team was unable to make a direct approach to clients, and instead the initial approach to parents was made through their caseworkers. The process was as follows: The research team provided the recruiting agencies with an outline of the selection criteria and copies of the participant information statement. Caseworkers identified participants who met the criteria and then informed the families about the project. Parents who wished to participate had the option of contacting the research team directly to participate or providing consent for their caseworker to contact us on their behalf. In all instances, parents opted for the caseworker to contact us on their behalf. The research team then contacted the parents and conducted an interview.

The involvement of caseworkers in the recruitment of participants for the study possibly biased the sample in two ways. It is unlikely that caseworkers would have approached clients who were hostile to them or their agency. Furthermore, the caseworkers indicated that most clients approached to participate agreed to do so; this may suggest a positive relationship between the caseworker and the client. In addition, the clients who agreed to participate may have had distinctive characteristics that meant they felt confident and willing to participate in the interviews. Despite these limitations to the sample, it was evident that the participants were able to offer critical and constructive reflections on their experiences and perceptions of their involvement in decision making.

The interviews were approximately 90 minutes long. The team developed and used a semistructured interview schedule that was divided into four parts: (a) a history of parents' involvement with the child protection system as parents, including discussion of the type of child and family welfare agencies involved with the family in relation to their current child protection matter and the types of decisions that had been made in relation to the protective needs of the children; (b) reflections on parents' experiences and perceptions of involvement in decision making, specifically the extent to which they felt they had been able to participate and whether this perception had changed over time; (c) reflections on parents' views of what would have improved their capacity, and the capacity of other family members, to participate in decision making; and (d) demographic information and information related to the child protection status of the family, for example the number of children subject to child protection related legal orders, such as guardianship orders or order pertaining to compulsory participation in interventions to promote the safety of the child or children while they remain in the home.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and entered into NVIVO® 7 software. We used the staged coding process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) to first identify relevant features in the transcripts, and then to name and define themes related to parents' experiences of participation in child protection decision making. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, members of the project team separately reviewed the transcripts to identify and define themes that were then compared to develop a coding frame. The coding frame was developed around parents' perceptions and experiences of their involvement, as parents, with child protection services. It included the major themes of barriers to participation for parents, children, and extended family; factors that facilitate parents' participation; strategies and techniques for promoting parents and children's participation; and the changing nature of participation over time.

Negative Experiences of Decision Making: Barriers to Participation

Thematic analysis revealed five themes pertaining to parents' negative experiences and perceived barriers to participation: poor communication by caseworkers, negative caseworker attitudes, difficulty in dealing with multiple professionals, problems related to the complexity of the process, and parent/family-related factors.

Poor Communication

All 10 respondents described experiences of poor communication by workers from the statutory authority. Within this overarching theme, two subthemes emerged: a failure to listen and consult, and a lack of clarity and transparency in the interactions.

Failure to listen and consult. A perception of "not being listened to" by the statutory authority was present, to varying degrees, in every interview and appeared to be the most consistent reason for dissatisfaction with interventions by the child protection authority. The sense of not being listened to ranged from reports of a complete failure on the part of workers to consult and to make themselves available to clients, to observations that workers did not appear to acknowledge or try to understand the services user's views. As one respondent stated,

They don't listen to no one, like I'd ring up and ask things about [child's name] or I'd ask for his worker and "She's not here, she's sick, she's at a meeting, she's away today." She never ever wanted to talk to me, ever. I used to ring up 10 times a day, and she still wouldn't ring me back. They made all the decisions, I had nothing to do with any of it. (PA 2)

Some respondents indicated that child protection caseworkers listened to some extent, but not in a way that involved meaningful dialogue or consultation. This led some respondents to view their interactions with the agency as a mere formality: "We made up a plan on the board, but it was really all for them, the way they wanted to have it. So I feel that they didn't really look towards my true thoughts" (PA 9). Overall, all respondents reported some instances of feeling powerless and affronted in the face of workers' failure to listen and consult.

Lack of clarity and transparency. Consistent with the views expressed by child welfare workers (Healy, 2009; Healy & Darlington, 2009), a subtheme of lack of transparency in the department's dealings with families was also apparent in most of the interviews (8 of the 10). This theme involved the perception that workers failed to maintain contact, provide information about the department's actions, or set clear and specific goals and requirements that parents could work toward. A large part of the issue was that respondents felt they were not provided with the information they needed to form a relationship with the department, let alone engage in a participatory decision-making process. Respondents discussed initial confusion about the reasons for the department's involvement and what they could expect from it. In discussing her initial involvement with the child protection authority, one respondent stated,

I found it was really hard to [engage], 'cause at first they didn't tell me what was going on, why they were there, and what their role was. And then the agencies I was involved with told me what their role was 'cause I was really against the department at first because they didn't help me at all, so I was very against them. (PA 1)

Several others talked about lack of transparency and continuing confusion throughout the process. Overall, parents' perceptions of a lack of transparency by the child protection authority contributed to a lack of trust in the decision-making process. The perception of a lack of transparency also created obstacles to participation, given that many respondents felt that the caseworkers were not fully sharing information in order for parents to participate as partners in the process.

Negative Caseworker Attitudes

In addition to feeling "not listened to," most respondents (7 of 10) perceived themselves as being judged by the child protection caseworkers. The lack of active listening seemed to be linked to this perception of being judged; many respondents reported feeling as though the workers had "made up their minds" about them prior to meeting with them.

I'm not telling they're a bad department, but I found that one thing that they didn't do was listen to me. I was a women that was suffering through…not any other reason than my own stupid letting myself down. But I was suffering and I needed some help, not negativity. And they were quicker to judge you on a negative level than they would be on a positive level, so I suffered. (PA 9)

For this respondent, and at least 2 others, there was a perception that caseworkers lacked care and compassion for the suffering of the parent.

Similarly, some respondents spoke of a superior and condescending attitude on the part of caseworkers. One respondent reported feeling treated "like a criminal" (PA 6), and another felt to be "made out like a liar" (PA 5). Further, even when allegations were subsequently found to be false, respondents reported there was no apology. Linked to this attitude was the perception that parents were expected to provide proof to back up their story and required legal representation to document the process.

Difficulty in Dealing With Multiple Professionals

Six respondents discussed the involvement of multiple service sites and agencies as a barrier to developing an effective working relationship with service providers. This criticism was raised in relation to both the statutory child protection authority and the nongovernmental sector. Respondents perceived that the involvement of multiple offices even within the same agency led to confusion and a lack of direction in casework.

High turnover of staff and the associated problem of inexperience were also seen by parents as barriers to their effective engagement with child protection caseworkers. For example, the female partner of the couple who participated in the study observed, "All our caseworkers were first-time caseworkers—yeah, first job, yeah, our case was their first case, and we probably had poor caseworkers, all five caseworkers over 2 years" (Mother, PA 7).

Two parents talked about being shifted around multiple governmental and nongovernmental agencies because of lack of fit between their complex needs and the service provision criteria of the agencies. Lack of collaboration among agencies both within government and across the governmental and nongovernmental sectors was also identified by parents as a major barrier to engagement with services.

Problems Related to the Complexity of the Process

Seven respondents pointed to difficulties that stemmed from the complexity of their problems and the protracted nature of the intervention process, and the associated perception that workers had a limited focus on facilitating change. One aspect of this complexity concerned the potentially conflicting needs of children, couples, and families, and the interdependent nature of family relationships:

They really don't take into consideration the mother, father, and child—the strong bond between the three of us. And when they took [daughter], it broke, and they do not really care about the development of the child at all. (PA 3)

This respondent's perception that the agency was not concerned with the "strong bond" in the family is reflective of child protection reforms that led to the separation of child protection investigation and assessment responsibilities as a government service responsibility, whilst early intervention and family support responsibilities were almost entirely transferred to the nongovernmental sector (Healy, 2009). An important consequence of these reforms was that child protection investigations were increasingly focused on protecting children from harm within their own homes and less concerned with understanding and enhancing the family context, because the responsibility for family support was no longer a primary concern of government (Healy, 2009). As a result of the reforms, the child protection authority did not engage with families unless child protection risk was considered

to be high or very high. Many respondents commented that the lack of early intervention and family support had contributed to protracted, frustrating, and costly involvement by the child protection authority.

Another important aspect of this theme was the long, complex, and constantly changing process of intervention, as well as the difficulty parents had in envisaging and reaching a successful outcome. Some parents discussed the unexpected and disheartening effect of setbacks that occurred during the process and its seemingly arbitrary nature. Some parents explicitly noted that negative attitudes and behaviours by caseworkers could create a sense of defeat in the parent. For example, one respondent stated,

> You feel like you don't have a voice in the decision making 'cause it goes in one ear and out the other with the department....You feel like a failure, that's how they make you feel…they just make you feel like giving up. (PA 1)

Maintaining hope is important for parents as they confront the challenges of providing a safe home for their children. The perception that the child protection caseworker contributed to, in this instance, the parent feeling "like a failure" would seem an obstacle both to partnership and to the ultimate goal of achieving child safety.

Parent/Family-Related Factors

Whereas the themes discussed to this point focus on parents' interactions with the child welfare service system, 6 parents also mentioned factors in their own lives that acted as barriers to their participation. The most frequently identified factor consisted of high levels of chaos in the family's life. More specifically, the presence of homelessness, domestic violence, drug/alcohol abuse, and/or mental health issues were identified by participants as severely limiting their capacity to understand and engage with the child protection agency. In situations where the actions of one parent were the primary reason(s) for the involvement of the child protection authority, particularly in situations of domestic violence, respondents emphasized that the innocent parent needed to be helped as well. Yet, all those respondents who cited domestic violence as the primary reason for child protection concerns perceived that the child protection agency had held them responsible for not changing their partner's behaviour and provided little support for the parent in escaping the violence.

In reflecting on their initial engagement with child protection authorities, several parents reported feeling confused about the nature of the departmental role and reasons for involvement; some of this confusion may reflect their own state of trauma at the time. Four of the 10 respondents acknowledged the validity of questions regarding their parenting capacity.

> I felt like it was so unfair, but at the same time I know that the reason they got took [sic], it was my fault, you know, in a roundabout way it was. So I should have been stronger….People that are very, very incompetent should not have any decision making until they've pulled themselves up enough to show that they can cope. I mean with me, it was alcohol—and trauma. Big-time trauma, stress. (PA 9)

The respondents also stated that, in hindsight, the decision taken by the agency to temporarily remove their children had been the right one because of their inability to address their children's protective needs. However, even among this group of respondents, there was

concern about aspects of the process of removal and continuing issues around poor engagement between the child protection authority and the family in the process of reunification.

Facilitating Participation and Positive Outcomes

The interview data revealed three themes in parents' perceptions of practices and attitudes that were more positive: demonstrating a willingness to listen, demonstrating a supportive attitude, and achieving change through goal-focused intervention. These themes could create the foundation for more participatory practice.

Demonstrating Willingness to Listen

Respondents' perceptions that workers were listening to their views were linked to positive engagement, regardless of the context in which the worker was employed (8 of 10 respondents). Some parents reported that staff from the child protection authority had listened to them, although they sometimes noted that this applied only to one office or caseworker. As the following excerpt indicates, effective listening involves the willingness not only to hear but also to try to understand the client's point of view.

> I disagreed with them letting B's [former partner's] parents see the kids, 'cause they still had to have supervised contact as they were deemed unsuitable carers. Looking back, [statutory office name] did the right thing, and they heard me when I said I didn't want the kids to see B's parents as much, and they understood the "why" as well. (PA 6)

That the respondent felt listened to and that her opinion was evident in the case plan conveyed respect to her. Respondents also provided multiple examples of feeling listened to by the nongovernmental agencies, sometimes drawing comparisons with the perceived unwillingness to listen among some caseworkers from the statutory authority. For respondents to this study, it appeared that the perception of caseworkers' willingness to engage respectfully created trust and potential for partnership, regardless of the context in which the caseworker was employed.

Demonstrating a Supportive Attitude

Our findings also highlight the role of workers' supportive attitudes in building an effective relationship; this was mentioned by 8 parents. This attitude was sometimes reflected in simple ways, such as being consistent, keeping appointments, and being available to the client. In the following example, a respondent talked about her experiences of the statutory agency.

> Then I was transferred to [name of office], and [name of office] was really good. They came to appointments on time or would let me know if they couldn't make it or if they wanted to change appointments. They let me know everything that was going on with [former partner] and his contact with the girls, 'cause he was having supervised contact with the girls. They kept me informed. (PA 6)

Similarly, another parent noted that a caseworker was flexible and tenacious in trying to offer support, and this helped to build trust in the caseworker. Although some respondents discussed a supportive and helpful attitude from statutory workers, they were more likely to

report this from nongovernmental agencies. Respondents reported that feeling that the worker "believed" in their capacity to make the necessary changes, whilst being realistic about their situation, was also helpful. In speaking of their interactions with nongovernmental agencies, some participants commented explicitly on the breadth of support provided and the practical and emotional benefits of their role in advocating for the client.

Achieving Change Through Goal-Focused Intervention

Given the complexity of most child welfare cases, it is not surprising that workers' attempts to promote change and develop goal-focused interventions were also seen in a positive light (6 parents raised this issue). For example, one couple appreciated the flexibility of casework staff from the statutory authority in helping them to develop a rehabilitation plan that focused both on drug and alcohol issues and on parenting skills.

Several respondents talked about the experience of achieving change, usually with the help of a nongovernmental agency, through building their confidence in themselves and their practical capacity to participate in decision making and other processes for improving the safety of their children. As noted earlier, some parents noted that the intervention process could be hampered by negative caseworker attitudes and behaviours, which could create a sense of defeat in the parent. Conversely, 2 parents described a positive spiral effect, in which constructive behaviours on the part of client or caseworker tended to be met by more focused involvement of the other party. As 1 respondent stated,

> With me, all of a sudden they just turned around, and it was when I started to get a little bit more, um, assertive, I suppose you could say. I wanted to—I started to do things, like because I was having the children two days out of seven, I started going through Centrelink [income support agency] and making sure that I got some income. (PA 9)

Overall, respondents reported increased capacity to engage as partners with the child protection authority as they gained some power in the decision-making process. The parents' perception of power was enhanced by access to clear information about concerns, the experience of caseworker support, opportunities to take practical steps to create change, and, importantly, having these steps recognized by the statutory authority.

Discussion and Practice Implications

The findings indicate that barriers to parents' participation exist at both the systemic level and also the level of caseworker behaviour and attitudes toward parents. One of the most significant systemic barriers was the development of a stand-alone tertiary child protection authority responsible only for child protection assessment and investigation, with little involvement in early intervention or family support (Healy, 2009; Thorpe, 2008). Parents' perceptions that their opinions were not sought or listened to is perhaps reflective of the strong investigative focus the child protection authority and the emergence of an individualistic approach to children's rights, wherein children's rights to safety were conceived of as separate to the rights and needs of families to support and opportunities for participation. For example, Child Safety Services has developed a charter of children's rights to participation but has no equivalent charter for parents or kin.

Another systemic factor raised by respondents was the complexity of the child welfare sector, with its multiple agencies and offices. In some cases there was a perception that the criteria for agencies' service provision were rigid and did not fit their complex needs, and that families could therefore miss out on much-needed assistance. This perception mirrors that of child protection and mental health professionals; a recent study indicates that workers think it is quite common for the needs of either parents or children to "fall through the cracks" of service delivery (Darlington & Feeney, 2009). Another problematic aspect of dealing with multiple professionals concerned high rates of staff turnover—this contributed to unstable contact and difficulties related to workers' inexperience (see Kapp & Propp, 2002).

Despite the references to family-related and systemic barriers to participation, the major focus of parents' comments was on workers' attitudes and behaviours. All respondents reported instances of poor communication by caseworkers. These communication problems were of three types: failure to listen and consult, lack of clarity and transparency in the interactions, and a perception that practitioners adopted negative attitudes toward parents (see Dale, 2004; Forrester et al., 2008; Hansen & Ainsworth, 2007; Thorpe, 2008). Importantly, the interviews provided evidence of spiral effects, both negative and positive, in which the emotional tone of worker–client interactions became more pronounced over time (see Hernandez et al., 2008). In relation to negative effects, it seems that judgmental attitudes and failure to consult can create a sense of despondency or defeat, which results in parents tending to give up. Similarly, it is possible that parents who appear withdrawn or disinterested may not elicit the most concerted efforts on the part of practitioners.

Indeed, despite the frequency of these negative experiences, many parents also described positive interactions with practitioners. Specifically, parents mentioned the importance of workers being willing to listen, demonstrating a supportive attitude, and setting achievable goals. These findings support previous research indicating that workers' demonstration of a helpful attitude is experienced by parents as an important, if not the most important, factor in building an effective relationship (Maiter et al., 2006). Further, our results indicate that such a relationship is possible in a statutory context.

Our findings have important implications for caseworker recruitment, training, and practice. The child and welfare system is complex, involving both governmental and nongovernmental agencies; further, the needs of the families are often complex, given that problems such as poverty, substance use, and domestic violence increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect (Budd et al., 2001). For these reasons, it is vital that child protection workers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to engage with families in complex situations.

Conclusion

The parents who participated in our study provided important insights into the experience of being a service user under a child protection model of service provision. Even though all respondents reported negative experiences, most also reported positive experiences with caseworkers. At the heart of this positive engagement appeared to be a willingness and capacity on the part of the caseworker to recognize, and respond to, the parent as a service user and a partner in a process of change. There is much child protection authorities can learn from the experience of parents about the importance of respectful relationship building as a basis of partnership and as a means to achieving the ultimate goal of protecting vulnerable children.

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