What constitutes Child Friendly Communities and How are they built?

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) was founded by a group of eminent experts and organisations in reaction to increasingly worrying trends in the wellbeing of Australia’s young people.

ARACY is a national organisation with members based across Australia. ARACY asserts that by working together, rather than working in isolation, we are more likely to uncover solutions to the problems affecting children and young people.

ARACY is a broker of collaborations, a disseminator of ideas and an advocate for Australia’s future generation.

ARACY has two primary goals:

1. To promote collaborative research and agenda setting for children and young people
2. To promote the application of research to policy and practice for children and young people.

This paper is one of a series commissioned by ARACY to translate knowledge into action. This series of papers aims to convert research findings into practical key messages for people working in policy and service delivery areas.

The ARACY topical papers may also be the focus of workshops or seminars, including electronic mediums.

Developed for the Facilitating Partners of the Australian Government Communities for Children initiative, this paper is now being made available to a wider audience via the ARACY website: www.aracy.org.au
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Pristine, borderless and abundant – a world of hope is child friendly (1).

The concept of creating communities that are child friendly is one that has been gaining momentum in Australia over the last decade.

This paper draws on research and practice literature as well as the thoughts, experiences and observations of practitioners working across Australia, as it seeks to draw out the key themes and elements’ regarding what constitutes a child friendly community and how this kind of community can be built.

The literature included in the paper spans the areas of child development, community development, urban planning, community economic development, social research and early childhood education. The themes that emerge from this range of literature are then assessed against the data gained as a result of semi-structured interviews conducted with 16 practitioners across Australia. The practitioners interviewed came from a broad range of urban, regional, rural and remote communities in all states except Tasmania. Eleven of those interviewed were working at Communities for Children sites and five were working in a range of other contexts.

The themes discussed in the paper represent a synthesis of those found in the literature and those identified by practitioners. While there is a significant degree of consistency between the literature and interview data, there are some issues identified by practitioners that are not mentioned extensively in the literature.

From the old popular adage it takes a village to raise a child, to the explosion of research and writing on the connections between the early years of childhood and the social, emotional, intellectual and even
economic potential in adult life, there is growing interest from all walks of Australian life around the lives of children.

In addition to renewed interest in theories of attachment, the role of family and access to early childhood services, researchers such as Garbarino (2) emphasise the crucial role played by the neighbourhood in ensuring the well being of children.

In Australia, Vinson’s (3) work on adversity, resilience and geographic disadvantage identifies the important role played by social capital/social cohesion in creating resilience in disadvantaged communities. According to Vinson, the benefits of strong social bonds of trust and reciprocity in some disadvantaged communities act as buffers to the impacts of disadvantage.

This is corroborated by findings from a Spanish study conducted by Gracia and Herrero (21) where they concluded that adults who perceived their neighbourhood as having high levels of social disorder were twice as likely to report physical child abuse as those who perceived their neighbourhood as having low or medium levels of social disorder.

The backdrop to this discussion of child friendly communities explores the connections between the first five years of a child’s life and the social, cultural, economic and environmental world in which that child lives (4), as well as the role played by the wider community in the well being of children.

For people working to improve the quality of life for children, this paper offers two frames of reference. The first focuses on the importance of imagining and revisiting what a child friendly community looks and feels like. This process includes planning, action and reflection with all those working towards the goals of a child friendly community. The second is about the often difficult realities of working towards building a child friendly community.
It is about the actions and processes needed to take us closer towards our vision for a child friendly community.

**WHAT IS A CHILD FRIENDLY COMMUNITY?**

A useful starting point for discussion can be found in two key definitions for what constitutes a child friendly community. These definitions provide a framework for later discussions by assisting us to imagine and understand the range of fundamental requirements for any community that wishes to call itself child friendly.

The National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) defines a child friendly community as one in which …children are valued, supported, respected, provided for and actively included. It is one where children:

- play a part – are included in decisions, are free to take part and express themselves and to receive information;
- reach their potential – receiving the education and opportunities required to fully develop socially, emotionally, culturally, physically and spiritually;
- live well – receiving all the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter and health;
- are free from harm – protected from all forms of abuse and neglect.

(5)

Following on from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1979, the United Nations Children’s Fund – UNICEF – developed a set of nine building blocks for developing a child friendly city:

1. “Children’s Participation – promoting children’s active involvement in issues that affect them; listening to their views and taking them into consideration in decision making processes.

3. A City Wide Children’s Rights Strategy – developing a detailed, comprehensive strategy or agenda for building a Child Friendly City, based on the Convention.

4. A Children’s Rights Unit or coordinating mechanism – developing permanent structures in local government to ensure priority consideration of children’s perspective.

5. Child Impact Assessment and Evaluation – ensuring that there is a systematic process to assess the impact of law, policy and practice on children – in advance, during and after implementation.

6. A Children’s Budget – ensuring adequate resource commitment and budget analysis for children


These definitions provide a basic list of requirements for child friendly communities that can be applied in different contexts. These are:

- Making sure there are enough material resources allocated to children and families
- Making space for children to be listened to and be part of community decisions
• Making sure children are recognised in adult systems like the law and policy
• Examining those adult systems and changing them to make space for children to be included
• Making sure the interests of children are on everyone’s agenda
• Looking at all aspects of community life to see where children are and make them welcome where they are missing or unwelcome
• Making sure that building child friendly communities is a local, national and international activity.

Having established a generic framework and set of requirements for defining a child friendly community, our attention now turns to some of the practical considerations involved in building this kind of community.

BUILDING CHILD FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

Throughout the process of gathering and analysing information for this paper, eight major themes emerged as pivotal to the development of a child friendly community. Underpinning these themes is the notion that development and nurturing of relationships within families, between families, between families and the wider community, and with the service system act as the drivers in the successful development of a child friendly community.

Further to this, both the literature and evidence from practitioner interviews highlighted the crucial role of developing partnerships within local communities if progress is to be made in building a child friendly community. Partnerships between local government, business, local cultural and
Partnerships between local government, business, local cultural and community organisations and services (including schools), families and children are essential if child friendly communities are to be built.

There was a high degree of consistency between themes found in the literature and the evidence collected from practitioner interviews.

The eight themes that emerged, both through a review of the literature and interviews with practitioners, were:

- Welcome and connection
- Value
- Safety
- Meaningful action and self-determination
- Space
- Learning and development
- Support
- Time

The practitioner interviews confirm the themes identified in the literature, but also provide an important perspective, based on practical experience, that emphasises the variety of ways each theme manifests in different child friendly communities. They also highlight the importance of the relationships and connections across themes.

**Welcome and Connection**

*Always share if someone is lonely. Play with them and keep them company. (7)*

*Where children are welcomed, celebrated and enjoyed. (8)*
Context and Literature

The theme of welcome and connection discussed here includes formal and informal initiatives to greet, provide hospitality, and begin building relationships with families (including children). The parameters extend to opportunities for families with children to meet and connect with each other, for these families to make connections with the wider community, and for local services and institutions to participate in welcoming families with children.

In addition, this theme includes a consideration of the places and infrastructure in a local area, and the messages that these convey to families with children. In this context welcoming and connection tends to occur within a local rather than regional or wider geographical boundary. It may be a suburb, a town or a neighbourhood.

Paul Bullen’s (9) research on social capital and community development in the new release area of Warnervale, on the NSW Central Coast, found that universal formal welcoming programs for new families in that area provide a crucial window of opportunity to connect and build relationships with the most socially isolated families.

Bullen found that welcoming activities were seen by new residents as a legitimate form of unsolicited contact, and were effective in connecting families to a range of local services as well as setting up pathways for informal relationships between families in the local area. (10)

Sarah Wise, in her article, Creating ‘Child-Friendly’ Communities: A strategy to reclaim children from risk (11), also cites the increasing mobility of families in Australia over the past 20 years, (resulting in isolation from extended family
networks), as a compounding factor for families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. She argues that a community-wide response in building formal and informal connections, and developing relationships with these families, can play a significant role in mitigating a range of risk factors for children in the family.

**Practice Reflections**

In most of the conversations that contributed to this paper, practitioners said that child friendly communities were places where children were welcome and felt welcome. This experience of being welcomed was viewed very much as something that needs to take place within families, in the structures, facilities and services that children encounter in the community, and in the relationships, perceptions and networks of everyday life.

A key part of this theme described by those interviewed was the importance of new families experiencing a sense of welcome when they move to a new neighbourhood. This was raised by a number of people as an often missed opportunity to make contact and connect with families and children. The value of this type of activity in building a sense of belonging was also highlighted in interviews.

A number of those interviewed commented that the creation of a sense of welcome for all families with children was both a starting point and an indicator of success for their work in building a more child friendly community. In support of Bullen’s (12) findings, some practitioners described how welcoming initiatives for new parents had opened up an opportunity for services to connect with young, often isolated parents, and for those parents to connect with each other following the initial contact.

*Developing a range of both small and large scale places and spaces for welcome and connection were seen by practitioners as one of the few effective strategies they had experienced for building positive and potential long term connections with, and between, the most isolated and marginalised families in a range of communities.*
The other major issue raised during practitioner interviews was the way in that local services, public and public/private places, and facilities often acted as barriers to a sense of welcome and connection for families with children. For example practitioners described how a number of parents did not feel welcome when they took their children to the shops, to cafes, and even to services that existed for children (such as health or developmental services).

The message given to parents, and to children, that they are not welcome was conveyed through the absence of adequate facilities for nappy changing, breast feeding, toilets with enough space for children and parents, public transport that was difficult to use with a pram (and often infrequent), and sometimes signage that clearly prohibited or restricted children in shops, restaurants, cafes and other places used by the adult population.

In addition to this, where a token effort was made to include children in community structures and processes, the message was also clear that they were really not welcome. Examples from interviews included local parks with neglected play equipment or no fencing around them and, more controversially, getting children to produce artwork depicting their ideas and visions, and then using this artwork without including the ideas and visions of participating children in the project itself. Images created by children can become marketing or design devices rather than genuine contributions to planning.

Those interviewed stressed the importance of everyday services and facilities giving a message of welcome to families with children. These messages were conveyed through design, location and in the way in which business was done. Some of those interviewed saw that changes in this area were a priority in their work and had included a number of initiatives for more
welcoming everyday places. For others this task was seen as overwhelming, and one that could only be addressed in the long term.

For the contributors to this paper, a sense of welcome and connection for children and parents was a central element to any child friendly community. They identified a number of practical indicators that would tell them the community was becoming more welcoming of children. The indicators were:

- Seeing parents and children together more often and in more adult spaces like shopping centres and cafes in the community
- Parents saying they feel confident and welcome to take their children with them in the day to day business of life. As one observer described, parents would feel good about bringing their kids with them, not like it was just more hard work
- More opportunities for parents and children to get together socially
- Children see themselves as belonging as family members and community members
- Every new family in the area being welcomed formally and informally.

**Challenges and Promising Directions**

The major challenge for those wanting to work on welcoming and connecting actions, projects and initiatives, is developing an effective window of opportunity to begin the process, that is seen as credible by families and the wider community.

There seems to be room for both a community-wide, universal approach, particularly in new communities, and more targeted initiatives focused on new parents. Universal approaches to welcoming have the potential for a greater impact in the level of engagement across the community, but
limited funding for this type of initiative means that it is not as common as it could be.

Using either approach, dangers arise when the initiative is run like a one-off event rather than a first step to building long term relationships. Welcoming and connecting projects must be clearly attached to a range of longer term relationship building structures and processes that genuinely engage the interests and needs of families and children(13).

It is clear that achieving a change in the services, infrastructure and places within communities so that they become more welcoming of children, involves challenges in working with a range of local and often broader stakeholders. The development of partnerships with local government, business and community groups working on a range of projects provides some promising directions in this area. From community planning processes to awards or other incentives for those who improve the number or range of child friendly places, the development of a positive local agenda for child friendly communities, that brings families with children around the table with a range of other stakeholders, has the potential to further promote connections and engage with families in a local context.

**Value**

**Context and Literature**

Closely related to a sense of welcome and connection is the idea that children should be recognised as valuable assets in a child friendly community. This is not to say that children are seen as objects in community
life, but rather for their dual role as daily contributors in families and the wider community, and as people who need to be cared for and nurtured both by families and the community at large.

If welcoming and connection are seen as the first step in developing a sense of belonging, recognising the value of children as genuine community contributors underpins the development of this sense.

The theme of value discussed here includes the ways in which children are defined within community life; the opportunities available to them to participate in local decision making and planning, the practices that include and exclude children, and the different valuing of specific groups of children by communities.

Valuing children is viewed from two perspectives in the discussion:

Firstly, children (of all ages) must be recognised here and now as citizens in the structures, processes and decisions that flow through the social, economic, environmental and cultural aspects of society. Marc Jans (14) points to a need for the notion of citizenship to include much more than a framework of adult rights if children are to participate effectively as community contributors. He describes the range of skills and capacities of children as social actors and suggests a definition of citizenship as a learning process for adults and children. He argues that this broader definition creates a range of opportunities for children to participate in decision making and planning. For Jans, this definition recognises children as experts in the environments where they spend most time – home and neighbourhood – and recognises a range of child-centred ways to participate including imaginative play.

Secondly, in addition to the here and now, the value of children exists into the future as they grow to be adults, contributing and benefiting in different
ways. Notions of caring for and nurturing children in a child friendly community co-exist with the recognition of their role as contributors in the here and now. Hertzman (15) explores this idea from the perspective of children who are socially excluded. He argues that if there is not a shared community responsibility in creating and maintaining quality environments for children to develop, some children are less valued in their early years and become less valued as adults into the future.

For Hertzman, valuing children as they grow up is much more than providing services to address their needs. He argues that developing and contributing are essential parts of the early childhood experience in a community that truly values its children.

Following on from Hertzman’s reflections, any discussion about the value of children in community life must include consideration of the ways in which different groups of children are valued differently. Michael Bach (16) writes in relation to children with a disability on the importance of exploring ideas about value that go further than those covered by a rights framework. He argues that structures and processes which exclude specific groups of children often exist under the radar of rights alone. His observations are useful in thinking about the entrenched ways that racism and discrimination devalue and exclude children in many communities.

A final aspect of this theme that is highlighted in the literature, and was reflected in practitioner observations, is the importance of business partnerships in promoting the value of children across local communities. Healy and colleagues (17) in their study Creating Better Communities: A Study of Social Capital Creation in Four Communities, emphasise the range of community building activities that the business sector is often engaged in and the social capital building role that these businesses often play in local communities. This role is particularly relevant in developing child friendly communities.
communities where the value of children can be promoted with the backing of local business through the sponsorship of local activities, for example, sports.

**Practice Reflections**

There was a strong sense amongst those interviewed that children were under-valued in the communities in which interviewees were working. There was an even stronger sense that some groups of children within communities were valued differently to others.

Practitioners were asked to rate their community on a scale of 1 – 5 in relation to how child friendly they thought it was (with 5 being most child friendly). Most people rated their community as between 2 and 3. The most interesting information that emerged from this question was the care that each interviewee took to talk about how specific groups of children were much less valued than other children in their communities. More than half of those interviewed said that for some children in the towns and suburbs they were working in, the rating would be 0 or 1 out of 5.

This was raised as an issue for parents as well. Many of those interviewed had observed a clear difference in value between the group they identified as mainstream parents and parents who, because of age, cultural difference, social-economic or other factors, were viewed by the broader community as less valuable parents and citizens.

Many of those interviewed observed that opportunities for children to have their voices heard and to participate in community planning, service planning or local decision making, were either limited or non-existent.

A number of practitioners also reflected that, because of time and other pressures, service providers often did not take time to include children or
parents in service design. Many saw parents and children as service recipients rather than decision makers. This was not seen as a deliberate form of exclusion but one that nevertheless impacted on the way in which parents and children were valued and the opportunities they had to participate.

While everyone interviewed expressed concern that they had not consulted with children enough, there was a range of projects that had included children’s views and priorities in key planning and design documents. Using different formats for expression, children as young as two and three years had constructed models, developed artwork, taken photos, sung songs, talked and walked around communities with adults to contribute their ideas.

Practitioners who had been involved in these projects could clearly identify the dimensions that had been added to the planning process in response to children’s participation. In relation to valuing children as citizen participants in community life, three observations were made by interviewees that are particularly important:

- In most cases, where children participated in community projects and planning, it was in the form of a one-off consultation. Structures and processes were usually not in place for an ongoing dialogue with children.
- Often, little consideration is given to the expectation that children can effectively participate in adult processes. One practitioner observed that even though we use painting and models to consult with children, we usually then put their information in a strategic plan that they can’t understand, and we don’t share our information with them once the plan is done.
- Often, children were asked to participate in community planning or projects as one group, with no consideration given to the different cultural, social, environmental or developmental factors they brought
Many practitioners felt that children did belong as connectors and teachers, helping adults to reflect on community identity, their own family and friends, and the importance of listening to new voices. However, there was a consensus that there was much more work to do before children are valued as they should be in a child friendly community.

One further reflection made by a number of practitioners was that the perceived value of children in the community was often diminished because of the view that caring for children was a private responsibility of parents, rather than a broad community responsibility. This was seen as a double jeopardy for some parents who had little or no support with their children and felt labelled by other members of the community when their children behaved inappropriately in public.

A number of practitioners highlighted the importance of building partnerships across the community, particularly with the business sector, as a valuable opportunity in promoting the value of children at a local level. The key to the development of these partnerships, according to the experiences of these practitioners, was in identifying and highlighting the benefits to business of valuing children, and identifying practical projects businesses could engage in that provided both a benefit to them and an effective initiative in valuing children. One example of this was engaging a local developer to fund a book about healthy eating for children, and to design a park for children under five years. This partnership promoted both the value of children and the new estate development as a child friendly one.

Challenges and Promising Directions

The challenge for building a community in which children are valued community members is twofold; increasing the value of children across the community, and addressing the different valuing of children within each community.
Designing planning processes, projects and services that take time to consider the different voices of children on a regular basis is the most promising direction for responses to this twofold challenge.

Two suggestions from those interviewed and from the literature offer some promise for children and families who have suffered entrenched exclusion from participating as valued community members:

- Practitioners need to start by asking to spend time in the spaces, conversations and activities those families think are important. This is about valuing what families value which may be different than what practitioners value.\(^{(18)}\)
- Listening and building relationships slowly with those families, building on the strengths they have in valuing children.\(^{(19)}\)

Practitioners identified a range of indicators that they were working on in developing a community where children were valued. These provide some practical directions for paying attention to the value of children and families:

- Stories about the value of children and the importance of listening to and caring for them are visible in the social and cultural life of a community in general, and of families within that community. A number of those interviewed highlighted these indicators and the importance of valuing cultural diversity in the telling of these stories. As one person summed up, these stories need to be told in different ways so that everyone can understand.
- Children’s voices are listened to and acted upon in service and community planning and design.
• Adequate material, training and time resources are put into encouraging learning, development and participation for children in local communities.
• Community members list children as assets in the local area.
• Attention is paid and resources set aside to address the inequalities that exist within the community between groups of children.
• Everyone in the community takes responsibility for local children or, as one person interviewed said:

  People in the community know each other and everyone is confident to look out for children whether they are yours or someone else’s. Looking out for kids is really seen as everyone’s responsibility, not just something people say.

• Parents/families are valued as expert voices in the life of their family and services listen to them as equals.

Safety

A child friendly community must be a safe place. Safe for children and safe for families. (20)

Context and Literature

Safety is closely related to the first two themes. In this context it includes the safety of public and private spaces for children, actions and projects that increase safety in those spaces, the way people occupy and use community and private space, and the impact of perceptions of safety for children and families in communities.

Strategies to reduce general lack of safety and disorder at a local level will have direct and indirect benefits for children through a reduction in child abuse.
The relationship between safety (actual and perceived) and levels of trust in the community forms a central axis in the reflections of those interviewed for the paper and in the literature. The research of Gracia and Herrero (21) from a national sample of 9,759 Spanish residents, makes a clear link between perceptions of disorder and danger within communities and a reluctance to report child abuse by members of that community due to fear. They argue that this cycle, which can develop from perceived to actual danger for children, provides some important clues in understanding the ways in which safe and dangerous communities for children develop. According to the findings of their study, strategies to reduce general lack of safety and disorder at a local level will have direct and indirect benefits for children through a reduction in child abuse.

Another observation from the literature is made by Beilharz (22) looking at the links between safety (perceived and actual), low levels of trust between community members, and a reluctance to participate in community activities. Describing a community change process in Long Gully, Bendigo, (Victoria) Beilharz draws a clear line between actual experiences of violence in communities, the development of a culture of fear and distrust, and a range of structural and process barriers for people participating in any community activities.

Safety and trust are therefore important elements that need to be carefully considered in efforts to develop more child friendly communities.

**Practice Reflections**

Perceptions of safety and actual safety were raised by all of those interviewed for this paper, as a central concern in every community consultation about life for children that had been run by Communities for Children sites, and for other children’s projects.
Two thirds of those interviewed said the fear of danger for children, and the perception that the community was not a safe place for children or adults, were seen as key factors to overcome in creating a child friendly community. Keeping children safe from harm was seen as the starting point for all communities wanting to become more child-friendly. It was mentioned more often (in every interview) than access to healthy food (raised in 5 of the 16 interviews), and to health and other services (raised in 14 of the 16 interviews).

Practitioners identified a range of indicators that they were working on to improve the safety of children in local communities:

- Children have secure, stable housing.
- Children are not in the path of violence or abuse – either within the family or the community.
- Public spaces and facilities such as parks are fenced and have well maintained equipment.
- Parents feel confident to let their children play in the front or back yard.
- In public places parents and the wider community are visible, which provides natural surveillance for children. This was summed up in the statements by two practitioners that there are no lonely, isolated places where children in trouble cannot be seen, and there are a lot of people around to take responsibility for children’s safety.
- Parents and the wider community know what to do to keep children safe – they have information and understand what a safe community for children looks like, what to do to avoid danger or to address it if they need to.
Challenges and Promising Directions

Challenges in relation to safety identified by practitioners and the literature are threefold:

1. Creating a sense of hope that change is possible. Many communities have developed significant mistrust and see the community as an unsafe place for themselves and their children.

2. Changing perceptions of safety. Addressing actual safety is important as a signal for change but the bigger challenge is changing perceptions of safety. Promising approaches often centre on creating opportunities for community members to tip the balance of power regarding safety in the opposite direction. This can be done through initiatives that give people a reason to get together at a street or neighbourhood level to build relationships with each other and establish a sense of solidarity focused on safety for children.

3. Developing an understanding of the way families and children establish their sense of safety and the possible barriers their experiences and perceptions are creating to participation in day-to-day and community activities. Both Gracia and Herrero and Beilharz referenced earlier, note the norms and often punitive sanctions that exist in communities with high levels of violence and low levels of trust. Understanding the impacts of these provides an important insight for practitioners in working effectively on safety.

Meaningful Action and Self-Determination

Context and Literature

People will generally focus on what they consider important. This theme revolves around discovering what families with children find important, and
tapping into the motivation which accompanies that. Success in this
eendeavour underpins success in all of the other themes.

Kretzmann and McKnight (23) describe strong communities as places that
pay attention to what they have; to relationships and to what they are
motivated to do together. Beilharz (24) supports this notion as crucial in
working alongside families and communities to bring about change. In Long
Gully, families gathered around activities that they thought were meaningful
to improve life for children in that community: a football team for under 12s,
working with local schools, or running community events were all included.

The lessons from the literature are that child friendly communities are places
that prioritise activities or projects that families and children find meaningful
and are motivated to get involved in.

Practice Reflections

Three key insights emerged on this theme during the practitioner interviews:

1. Many practitioners found that families and children, like most other
people in the community, will only get involved in something
(whether it’s a program, project, or local barbeque), if it is something
they see as meaningful to them. They emphasised the importance of
starting any project by listening to the experiences and priorities of
families and children. This was captured very clearly by one person
interviewed, who said:
Listen to parents and families – start with what they want to do and build on their enthusiasm to do what they think is important or they won’t get involved.

2. A number of practitioners observed that the activity or project that you do to build a more child friendly community is not as important as creating an opportunity to get people together, develop an idea and get involved. The range of projects and activities described by those interviewed was large and tailored to the particular communities in which they were developing. Reflecting this observation is the comment made by another interviewee:

*Sometimes building the park is more important than the finished product. Getting everyone together to do something for and with local kids was the exciting bit.*

3. Developing local projects and activities with families and children rather than coming to communities with a pre-designed package opens up pathways for connections, information, learning and development for children and families that didn’t exist before. For many of those interviewed, starting with projects that families themselves had identified as meaningful had additional benefits in building relationships with new families.

A number of practitioners spoke at length about listening closely to families and children and developing ideas that built directly on the things that those families thought would make the most difference to their lives and those of their children. Many of these things were not about formal services or programs, but about building informal relationships or responding to very practical dilemmas. Whether it was about forming a local football team run by families, developing a community garden, establishing a community laundry so local children have clean clothes and Mums have somewhere to get together, running a disco for local kids under ten, or making and selling
affordable, nutritious take-away meals for working parents from the local child care centre kitchen, each project provided surprising opportunities for discussion, training, information or building relationships that were meaningful for those involved and contributed to a more child friendly community.

Challenges and Promising Directions

A key challenge for practitioners is resisting the pressure to present families with ready-made answers to the issues that concern them. Spending time and stepping back from providing answers may allow families and children to move from identifying issues to developing their own responses. Practitioners can then play a useful role in supporting and resourcing those responses. For marginalised families in particular, this approach offers promise based on the evidence from the field and from literature described above.

A related challenge for practitioners is the importance of recognising that children themselves are continually seeking and finding meaning in their family and community context, and that this happens informally far more frequently than it does within formal structures. Both children and parents tend to act in ways that are meaningful to them and determined by their priorities.

Space

Context and Literature

One of the most visible aspects of a child friendly community is the number and design of child-friendly spaces. These spaces can be seen across the community and include those designed specifically for children, adult spaces that are child friendly, formal public spaces such as parks, informal spaces such as streets and neighbourhoods, and spaces like front yards that act as a buffer between home and neighbourhood.
Louise Chawla (25), in examining the role of children and young people in planning for human settlements, argues that children often have a higher level of expertise and knowledge about local environments because they use them to a much greater level than adults. For her, including children in the planning of physical spaces at a local level is imperative because of the benefits that come with their knowledge.

Susan Speak (26) also highlights the importance of including children’s perceptions about space and their observations and experiences in playing, socialising and moving through community spaces to assist in addressing issues of safety, access and amenity, particularly in neighbourhood spaces. Her work on the Cruddas Park estate in Newcastle UK found that children reflected similar concerns about public spaces as their parents and in addition, provided unique insights into the way those spaces were used.

**Practice Reflections**

Those interviewed for this paper came from such a range of geographic places and contexts, that the amount, type and design of child friendly spaces within each community were very varied.

For some urban and even suburban areas, the pressure on green space and the limited number of local parks was a big issue for local children and families. For other suburban, rural and remote communities, green space was not such an urgent issue.

Taking these differences into account, the major themes with regard to child friendly spaces that emerged from practitioner interviews were:
• Changing adult spaces to welcome and support children. This was discussed earlier in relation to welcoming children and families in adult spaces such as shopping centres, streetscapes and other public and public/private spaces such as health services, schools. Child-friendly toilet and baby facilities, wide pathways, places to sit down with a pram are all included here.

• Making play spaces challenging and imaginative. This includes the design of parks and other play spaces with a range of activities, of opportunities for children to interact with the equipment, plants, animals in some cases, with other family members and other children.

• Expanding the number of spaces where children are safe and able to go. A number of those interviewed spoke about working in neighbourhoods to reclaim the street as a child-friendly space and even reclaiming the front yard for children.

• Creating activity in spaces that give children and families a reason to come into them. While much work was being done on the design and safety aspects of local parks and play spaces in communities, an observation made was that more than a well designed park was needed to create a child friendly space. While a safe, well designed park was seen as a good local asset, it was the activities and events (as small as a picnic or as large as a community fair) that are as important as the park itself. One comment that described this idea was: not just green spaces but reasons to go there.

• Designing and building child-friendly spaces with children and families. Practitioners identified a number of participatory community park projects involving parents, parents and children and children alone working with schools, councils, and developers, to design and build parks. Where children and families have been involved from the start and the design is developed reflecting the ideas of these groups, together with council or another park builder, the projects have contributed to building a more child-friendly community.
Challenges and Promising Directions

Three significant challenges facing practitioners in relation to space are:

1. Developing an understanding of the way children and families with children use spaces and how they would like to change those spaces if they could.
2. Developing the range of partnerships necessary to modify existing spaces and design new ones in the community that are child-friendly. These include partnerships between services, local government, developers, business and local families.
3. Developing structures for the design and governance of community spaces that incorporate the ideas of children and families in an equal and ongoing manner.

A number of promising responses to these challenges are described in the practitioner reflections above. They include strategies ranging from comprehensive planning frameworks that centre of children’s use of public spaces, to localised initiatives where families and children renovate a local park.

Learning and Development

*Things are safe, they can have fun, grow and learn* (27)

Context and Literature

This theme explores the framework the community creates for children to effectively learn and develop. In this context learning occurs in both formal and informal ways. The environment in the community, in terms of attitudes, in the way spaces can be used, and activities can either encourage or discourage the idea that learning is a valuable activity. They also impact
significantly on the opportunities available for children and families to experience learning and development in its broadest sense.

There is abundant literature both in Australia and internationally on every aspect of this topic. However, for this brief discussion of a large and complex theme in relation to child friendly communities, two major concepts are particularly important.

The first is that of partnership, of services and families working together on learning and development for young children. This concept is explored well by Nicola Billman (28) and her colleagues who examine the benefits and challenges of partnerships between parents and children’s services in their research. They conclude that the development of shared understandings between parents and child care workers about early childhood education was a key determinant of successfully building these partnerships.

The second focuses on creating opportunities for learning in which children and parents can share in the learning process. One interesting example of this in the literature is a family literacy program described by Jennifer Jayatilaka (29). This program recognised and built on opportunities for parents to engage with their children in home literacy practices that enhanced outcomes at school and increased active participation by parents in their child’s learning. The importance of everyday places and learning is highlighted here.

**Practice Reflections**

Practitioners made a range of observations about what worked for children and families to encourage an environment of learning and development. These observations include:
• Shared understanding of the impact of early years experiences on life’s course for everyone.
• Learning and development is viewed as important
• Utilising learning structures like childcare, playgroups and schools
• Utilising spaces and activities to enhance learning and development
• Schools making more of their resources, spaces and connections with children in the local community
• Recognising and respecting the strengths and perspectives of everyone
• Attitudes that reflect that learning and development in children is best supported by encouraging and supporting parents and other family members.

The importance for practitioners and families to develop a shared understanding of the impact of early years experiences on life’s course for everyone needs to be stressed. This understanding, from the perspective of practitioners, could be developed through activities ranging from making information and research in this area accessible and available to those working with children and to families in local communities, marketing and promoting the importance of early childhood experiences in the wider community, and providing practical, easy to understand information to local families with children under five years.

Working towards a culture where learning and development for children is seen as an everyday activity that happens everywhere was viewed as important, particularly for families who did not tend to use formal children’s services. While there was a strong focus amongst those interviewed on early childhood services (playgroups, child care services, preschools, developmental health services) working better together to access and encourage more families to make use of formal learning and development opportunities, there was also a sense that this was only one part of the picture. As one interviewee said:
I know we’ve been successful in our work when every family here sees learning as an everyday thing, something we all do all the time.

The provision of learning and development spaces and activities wherever people are, rather than where services already operate was a major focus for interview participants.

All of those interviewed stressed the importance of making the most of learning structures like child care, playgroups and schools. For these practitioners, a crucial role was working to build bridges and pathways between these structures and services. Practitioners identified bringing services into the same room, then working out ways for everyone to work together, was some of their most important work. One person reported that they had noticed more families using the local preschool since there had been co-operation with a couple of new playgroups where mothers had first felt comfortable to go with their child.

The provision of learning and development spaces and activities wherever people are, rather than where services already operate was a major focus for interview participants. There was a strong sense that where families are not using formal child care, whatever the reason, then the only way to make contact with them effectively was to go where they are (at home, shops, park, neighbourhood, immunisation), listen to what they were interested in getting involved in, and designing learning and development activities on this basis.

Schools have a potential to encourage learning and development in a much more comprehensive way. While much has been written about school readiness and transition to school for children, one of the key themes in many of the interviews was the untapped potential for schools to make more of their resources, spaces and connections with families in local communities prior to children starting school (30). As a dominant institution in the lives of
children, local schools were seen as good places for services to operate from, as a contact point for welcoming new families to an area, and as points of connection with younger siblings of children already at school. There was recognition amongst interviewees that schools are not accessible to some families and that they should not be seen as the only entry points to learning for younger children. They were, however, seen as important and under-used players in the learning and development spectrum for younger children and families.

Many of those interviewed reported working from the basis that everyone (including them) is learning together about children. An important comment made by a small group of those interviewed highlighted the danger of increasing the gap between families (and parents in particular) and the array of child experts who can be seen as the custodians of knowledge about child learning and development. This group reported that if they want to make connections and work with families and children that are isolated, and perhaps at the margins of community life, it is crucial to recognise and respect the strengths and perspectives of those families, and that they are learning along with them about children.

Learning and development in children is best supported by encouraging and supporting parents and other family members.

The final observation made by a number of those interviewed is that learning and development in children is best supported by encouraging and supporting parents and other family members. This might be by creating space and support for young parents to continue their education, by spending time with families during playgroups or informal play sessions listening and talking one on one with parents, or providing opportunities for parents to meet and learn from each other.
Challenges and Promising Directions

The major challenge for practitioners is to constantly re_visit and re_evaluate the range of opportunities they offer families and children for learning and development against the participation or absence of the most isolated children and families in the community. Promising directions in undertaking this include:

1. The development a range of flexible and accessible opportunities for children’s learning to take place in everyday places, as part of everyday life. Examples range from paint and play sessions in the street, mobile book and toy libraries, free books for new parents, to having a cup of tea in the park with the kids. Many of those interviewed emphasised that the biggest challenge for them in working towards a more child-friendly community was changing attitudes to learning, from a formal and often intimidating thing that happened at school, to something that everyone did with their kids every day.

2. Developing networks, training and support structures between children’s services at a local level, viewing each service type as part of a spectrum of children’s learning and development rather than in an either/or way is seen as positive by all of those interviewed.

Support

The job of workers is to gently join in with the support parents are doing their best to give their kids. (31)

Context and Literature

This theme is about the professional workers providing support, both direct and structural, to the efforts and hopes of parents in raising their children. It is
also about the informal support networks which exist in all communities, and how to strengthen them.

Key ideas in the literature that assist us in thinking about support are:

1. The effectiveness of services in providing support to children and families that are at the margins of community life. Kate Kovacs (32) offers some important insights about the accessibility of child abuse prevention services to families with a child at risk. She suggests from her research with service providers that these families are often unable to access services because of basic issues such as transport and lack of information. In providing an overview of the literature on service provision in the early years, June McLoughlin (33) argues that the existing human service system is unresponsive, stigmatising and ineffective and calls on us to shift to an integrated and responsive system.

These observations raise key questions in relation to the way support services are placed in communities and their scope in effectively accessing marginalised families and children.

2. The need for better collaboration between services, Jane Woodruff and Jon O’Brien (34), provide an interesting example here drawing on a range of evidence, for better collaboration between children’s and family services as a way of achieving better outcomes for children and for vulnerable families.

3. Further to these ideas, Ben Edwards (35) reflects on the lack of research in Australia about the long term impacts of neighbourhood support for marginalised families, but argues that what evidence there is supports an important role for local informal networks,
amongst other neighbourhood characteristics as important factors in improving outcomes for children in those families.

**Practice Reflections**

Evidence from the practitioner interviews highlighted a range of support types that they saw as crucial for a more child-friendly community. These included the most fundamental forms of support such as food and income, through to addressing issues of time pressure for working parents.

There is not a capacity in this paper to discuss in detail the range of support types raised by practitioners, but outlined below are some key issues that illustrate effective ways to approach the provision of support to families and children in different contexts.

When asked about life for children in the communities where they worked, three quarters of those interviewed reported that this was dependent on the economic and social resources of their parent:

> Families that have enough money to get by are getting by with their kids in this area, but the ones that are struggling to pay the bills are usually struggling with their kids as well.

These were seen as important in connecting families with formal child care services and other health and developmental services.

At the other end of the spectrum, some of those interviewed described the pressure on families where both parents were working full time and children spent long days in child care. For those families, a child-friendly community

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Pathways to employment and income security for families with children under five were flagged by half of those interviewed as a practical way to assist many communities become more child friendly.
was one that lifted the time pressures that impinge on children’s time with parents.

Feeding children a healthy diet formed an interesting crossroads for both these groups. From the interview information, families at the lowest end of the socio economic scale (particularly in rural and remote areas) find it difficult to buy healthy food due to its high price and the fact that supermarkets are located a considerable distance from where they live. Families with both parents working full time, as a result of having no time and exhaustion, were often eating takeaway meals:

> When parents are working all day and pick their kids up at 6pm, it’s easy to get a pizza or other take away for the kids than go home and cook. They want to spend some time with the kids before bed so there just seems to be no time to cook.

Another factor described for effectively supporting families with children, was that they know about and can easily use health and developmental supports and services.

The three key features of a service that fulfilled these criteria were:

- Firstly, these services were located in the the same area, if not the same complex, as a range of other children’s services.
- Secondly, they worked in co-operation with each other so that, for parents, they operated like a one stop shop.
- Thirdly, they were delivered in a way that welcomed and supported parents rather than labelling or diagnosing the family.

As one interviewee commented:

> This way of approaching services for families and children is so much better. Parents say it feels like a friendly space, not clinical like a hospital. You can have a coffee, pick up some information, talk to someone if you want to or see
someone at a formal appointment. We’re seeing families we never saw before and many of them are using the child care centre or preschool now.

The benefits of service hubs identified were:

1. Families did not have to go to three or four separate locations around town, or sometimes in the next town or suburb to use the range of services their child needed.

Services might be 15 minutes away by car but if you have to catch two buses it can take an hour and a half to get there. Parents taking their kids to appointments are out for the whole day.

2. Service providers were able to take a more holistic approach to their role with the right leadership and support.

One lesson we have learned is that you have to have someone who sees the big picture coordinating the Centre. They have a chance to see the varied experiences in children’s lives but if they are only operating from a service delivery and not a community world view, you run into troubles.

3. Families could use the childcare facility and also access other services such as a psychologist or family support without others knowing which service they were using. This was seen as particularly important in smaller communities.
4. Formal services and informal ones such as a coffee shop where mother’s groups can meet share the same space and information can be accessed easily by families using the space for different things.

Apart from formal service supports, the kind of informal support for parents that has already been discussed is worth mentioning again. For all of those interviewed, this type of support was viewed at the least as a way of families making contact and learning from each other and at best as creating an expanding and effective support network for children and parents that had the capacity to change local perceptions and practices in favour of children.

**Challenges and Promising Directions**

Major challenges with regard to the design and operation of formal support services are to respond in a flexible way to the range of family contexts that exist in all communities. The very different needs of working parents and those who are not in the workforce in terms of time, financial resources and access requirements is one example of the challenges facing support services.

Integrated service hubs seem to offer a promising model in response to these very differing contexts by addressing time, cost and service co-ordination issues for families. Using this kind of one stop shop model, as long as it operates in an integrated way, seems to create more accessible and accessed pathways to services for a range of families with children.

Key aspects of support, focus on both the informal and formal systems within the categories of **welcoming and connection**, **valuing** and **meaningful action**. Both systems must be built alongside one another.
Time

There would be more time to just be with children, and they would have more time to explore. (36)

Context and Literature

There are two parts to this theme. The first focuses on how practitioners manage expectations about how long it takes to improve things and the importance of allocating both money and effort, for “the long haul”. The second is about creating time for families to spend together and for children to explore the world around them.

The issue of time was one of the most consistent raised by practitioners. It is surprising to find, therefore, that there is less in the literature that examines this theme. One of the few discussions of the importance of time was highlighted by Beilharz (37) who describes the process of taking time to building relationships with community members before attempting change. This was seen as a key factor in establishing solid relationships and listening to what people were interested in doing. It also provided invaluable opportunities to come to an understanding of community dynamics and experiences.

Rawsthorne and Christian (38) in their research on government/community sector consultation also identify the importance of time in developing credible consultation and collaboration processes.

While Fawcett and colleagues (39) in their article on collaboration in community health, argue that the developmental nature of collaborative partnerships mean that time is an essential element for all those working in this way.

Practice Reflections
The majority of those interviewed recognised that nothing could replace time in building child-friendly communities. However, time pressures for parents and those who work with children means that time for children can be limited. A number of people commented that, given the available time, most families did their best to take time and do things together.

For these families a child friendly community is one that allows for more time outside work, and creates opportunities to make the most of the time available.

An observation was also made that in some communities there is more time available but the time spent with children in play, learning and building relationships can still be limited. The way in which time is used and structured with children is as important as the amount of time available. A number of practitioners suggested that they could play a useful role in creating opportunities for families to try new activities, play and learn together and enjoy the abundance of time with their children.

The way in which time is used and structured with children is as important as the amount of time available.

Many of those interviewed mentioned the tension that often exists between time parameters for services and those for families. These practitioners emphasised the importance of creating flexible activities for families. They recognised that the timetables of adults and children are not always the same and that parents often need a wider window of time to get places with their children than systems allow:

A lot of people come to the playgroup because you can come at different times all day and there’s enough space to accommodate everyone (38).
Challenges and Promising Directions

The most significant challenge for practitioners in relation to time, is the ongoing tension between the time that they thought was necessary to develop and maintain the relationships and structures essential in building a child-friendly community, and the realities of funding programs, projects and even support systems that are often time limited and focused on short term outcomes. Communities for Children practitioners have a keen awareness that time to truly listen to and build relationships with community members had been limited thus far. Workers also realised that many of the changes they hoped to encourage in their work over the next three years would be unlikely to be noticeable for five to ten years, long after the three years of funding for the program had ceased.

Many workers who were interviewed expressed that the desire to open up more time to listen and respond to local children was a priority but also a source of frustration. Many were acutely aware of the dangers in developing neat pre-packaged programs for families and children, rather than creatively responding to their ideas, because of time constraints and the expectation of quick results.

Responses to this dilemma focused on a combination of advocacy for funding to be allocated to communities for a more extended period, the development of community driven structures (that were seen by many practitioners as more sustainable and desirable in the long term) in addressing issues for children and families locally, and juggling the expectations of funders, families and children to maximise the time available to include local families properly in projects and planning.
INDICATORS FOR A CHILD FRIENDLY COMMUNITY

From the reflections, lessons and observations from the literature and practitioners on these eight themes, what are the key ideas or practice insights that can be drawn out to provide signposts for practitioners in building a more child-friendly community?

The remainder of the paper describes these practice insights with examples gathered from the data compiled for the paper.

Welcome and Connection

Practice Insight

Taking time and developing the skills to listen in depth to the varied voices of children and families, then acting together on what was heard, is the first step in welcoming children and families into community life.

Example

One local Council will be spending a year working on an action research project with workers and children learning together about what their child friendly community will include. Workers will learn how to listen, plan and take action with local children. Children will learn about finding their voice and having it included in what happens in their community.

Practice Insight

Welcoming new families to an area provides a unique opportunity to connect with children, particularly those from isolated families.

Example:

One local area aims to make sure every new family with a baby or child under five years is welcomed with some useful information, the gift of a book to read to their children, and a friendly connection to local people.
Practice Insight

Everyday places and activities can send messages of welcome. All sectors of the community can invest in children in this way.

Example:

A number of places are introducing awards for shops and businesses that develop child friendly initiatives or promote a message of welcome to children and families.

Practice Insight

Local opportunities to celebrate children can be catalysts in changing families and communities as long as they are part of a long term approach to community building, not one-off events.

Example:

Neighbourhood barbeques, a kids’ day out in the park and larger community fair days have been successful in many areas in bringing families with young children together with the rest of the community to celebrate and connect with each other. Where it was reported that these had made a difference in communities, they were also part of an overall approach to building community connections with families and children. Families who attended an event often went on to organise other events and activities rather than only attending over time.

Value

Practice Insight

All local children and their families are valuable contributors to community life and it’s important to build on strengths in families and communities. This is the key message for practitioners to build partnerships locally – with families, business, government, services, community and cultural groups.

Examples:
Play groups and play sessions are planned and run in partnership with parents rather than for parents.

Children, families and the local council spend time designing a neighbourhood they want to live in, then council plans using their perspective.

Parents and service providers sit together as equals to plan and support children and families.

The local Chamber of Commerce works with community groups and services to promote the value of children in all aspects of life in the area.

**Practice Insight**

When the stories about the value of children are told throughout the community (by residents, business, services and organisations, local government, schools, cultural and community groups), the impact on the lives of local children is significant. As all sectors of the community own the stories, they also own the responsibility for local children.

**Example:**

One community used traditional stories about the value of mothers and children to connect this idea to the history and culture of that community. Everyone who was a custodian of that story gave their permission for it to be told and because of this it has become a powerful agent for valuing local children and mothers.

Another community is developing the idea of children’s champions to promote the value of children in the local area by telling stories, having conversations and opening up opportunities for children to tell their own stories in the community. Children’s champions are identified in all sectors of the community and the value of children is promoted effectively by champions using the networks they know best. Eg: business, government, cultural groups, community groups, and faith groups, services and neighbourhoods.
Safety

Practice Insight

Safe places to play close to home promote community safety in a way that connects the neighbourhood with the care of children.

Examples:

In a number of areas the idea of reclaiming the street or even the front yard for children is a practical way to make the community safer street by street.

Fencing local parks is another simple way to improve safety for children in public places.

Practice Insight

Creating opportunities for families to get to know each other at a neighbourhood level and giving people a reason to come out of their house encourages belonging and safety. Reclaiming spaces for children has both an empowering and inclusive effect on life for children and the neighbourhood as a whole.

Example:

Activities like playgroups in the park, play sessions on the footpath and neighbourhood barbeques, have the potential to build local relationships. In some communities this has created confidence among people that everyone can look out for the safety of children.
### Meaningful Action and Self-Determination

#### Practice Insight

Imagine together what a child friendly community will look like locally and keep revisiting what you imagined to check on progress. This process of developing a joint vision and reflecting on it at regular intervals demonstrates a commitment to improving life for children and accountability for the wider community about how child friendly it really is.

**Example:**

> In some areas children and parents used pictures, conversations, models, stories and photos to imagine a child friendly community. All of these ideas were included in a local plan and regular opportunities to revisit the plan and change it are being put in place.

#### Practice Insight

Create spaces for families to get together and they tend to find meaningful reasons to connect. These are often structures or projects that provide a safe opportunity and a valued role for family members to join in a community activity.

**Example:**

> Families in one area came together around a sporting team for local children. In another area, families joined together to renovate a local park. Pram walking groups in some areas provide another opportunity for families to connect and act together.

#### Practice Insight

Families will get involved with activities that are important to them rather than ones that are important to services. Engaging effectively with families, particularly isolated or disadvantaged families, requires careful listening and creative responses to what those families see as a priority.
Example:

In many areas, parenting courses were poorly attended, if anyone came at all. Even though local service providers had identified parenting education as a major issue of concern, this was not identified as important by parents themselves. An issue that families had identified as important was a lack of affordable or free local activities for children. Often with the assistance of a small grant, parents and grandparents in these areas planned to run a neighbourhood kids activity (a kids’ fun day, disco, or play time) in response to this issue they felt was important. They worked with local services and actively took part in training on keeping children safe and managing behavioural issues because they were going to be looking after other people’s children as well as their own on the day of the planned activity.

Space

Practice Insight

Design creative spaces for and with children then give people a reason to come into those spaces and use them. The design and location of spaces, and the ways in which those spaces are used, are equally important in creating child friendly places.

Examples:

In one community, local council and the school worked with children to design and build a playground they would like to play in. They designed a treasure hunt with clues and activities for all ages. The playground was part of the school and children will be using it everyday in ways they may not have before.

Another community worked together to design a park then ran regular family friendly activities in the park so it became a hub for local children.
Learning and Development

Practice Insight

Sharing the information available about the early years of childhood in ways that parents and their children can understand and act on is a central task for practitioners. This requires working closely with a range of families in the development and distribution of resources.

Examples:

In one area, parents were developing information resources for other parents that were easy to use and understand.

In another area, an information book was being developed using pictures and short statements to help parents who found it difficult to read, understand the development of their child in a new way.

Practice Insight

Learning and development happens in everyday places and in many different ways. For practitioners it is important to utilise these places, and also to document the processes and outcomes for children as they learn and grow in everyday spaces.

Example:

In a number of areas, informal get-togethers over a coffee, a clean up at the school or a project in the shed, were where learning about children took place. These were the places people could watch how others approached family life, ask questions without feeling stupid and have a chat about the kids.

Practice Insight

Creating easy pathways for learning and development that can be used by parents and children has an impact on families across the socio-economic and cultural spectrum. These pathways will be different in each community
and a range of pathways need to be developed within communities for different family groups.

**Examples:**

> In a number of areas, supporting opportunities for young parents to continue their education through specific programs, free child care, and transport had been important in the learning and development of their children.

> Connection between playgroups and formal childcare services are also creating these kinds of user friendly pathways that families, who may not have used child care services of any variety, feel comfortable to use.

**Support**

**Practice Insight**

Establish practical and friendly pathways for families to get services they need. From the location, range and approach of services to building design and staff training, services need ongoing feedback from families about how they can be more accessible.

**Example:**

> A number of areas are planning or have established family centres with a range of services available from the formal (such as medical, speech therapy, educational support) to the most informal (café, internet café, hairdresser). Families can use any or all of the services and the space is designed to be welcoming and accessible.

**Practice Insight**

Service hubs are very effective in providing integrated, accessible services for families as long as they are properly planned as a new service type rather than a number of existing services sharing a building or precinct.
Example:

Where children’s services hubs have been established for some time, important lessons have been learned about the time, resources and leadership that are essential to encourage services that have often been used to working in isolation, to understand and work together with children and families. While locating services on the one site was seen as a major step forward, it was often discovered that services used to working in isolation don’t automatically start working in a coordinated fashion because they share accommodation. Further, skill and experience in running a stand alone service did not necessarily translate to a capacity for working in an holistic way with families. In response to this, areas with service hubs have paid a lot of attention to the structures systems training and relationships between all services that are part of the hub to ensure good coordination.

Practice Insight

Practical support is as important as health and other services. Responding to the practical priorities of families is important in its own right but also builds trust and credibility with families, particularly with isolated and marginalised families. This means programs must be flexible if they are going to have an impact for these families.

Examples:

Healthy affordable take away meals for working families produced by the kitchen at the child care centre is a popular support in some communities.

Community laundries in a number of areas provide practical assistance, a self sustaining business for the community, and a place for parents to get together while the washing gets done.

Mobile book and toy libraries take resources to where parents and children spend most of their time.
Practice Insight

Services must be constantly aware of the dangers of solving problem for families and communities, and of inadvertently placing the service system at the apex of community life. The importance for practitioners of stepping back, of supporting existing informal networks and acting as resources rather than problem solvers with families and communities cannot be over-emphasised.

Example:

In some communities support services are very conscious of designing and delivering services based on the idea that parents are in charge of parenting and that services can be most effective if they join in with building on the strengths of parents.

Time

Practice Insight

Take time and make time in the process. There is nothing else you can replace time with.

Example:

Most workers felt pressured by project time lines. One suggestion for opening up more time for them to spend listening to children and families was to regularly visit places and groups to just be with local children. This is a practical way of countering the idea that time spent in consultation with families and children is a one-off event.

Practice Insight

It’s not just time, it’s what you do with it. Practitioners can play an important role in transforming time into creative opportunities for families to engage with their children.
Example:

In some communities where parents have more time but are often isolated through a lack of transport or low income, a paint and play activity within walking distance of home is an easy way for parents to get involved in creative time with their children.

CONCLUSIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

Communities for Children Sites

People say it’s a nice place to have kids. They come here by choice to have kids. (40)

For practitioners working toward the development of more child friendly communities, the prospect is both daunting and energising. Daunting, because the sheer number and range of factors that need to be considered. Energising because the evidence from the literature and practitioner reflections tells us that there are some simple and practical steps that can be taken to improve life for children and families at a local level.

Each of those steps will be very different depending on the community. The themes and principles outlined in this paper are designed to guide the discovery, development and action that practitioners can facilitate and join as families and children work together to improve life for children.

The final part of this paper outlines a short set of questions that are useful as a launching point, and also to facilitate critical reflection for those interested in the development of a child friendly community.

- What do children imagine about a good place where they would like to live?
- What do parents imagine about a good place to have children?
- What are the things we are motivated to do together to get there?
• Who haven’t we heard from yet?
• What do they imagine about a good place for children to live?

Each of these questions is crucial and together they form a cycle for our planning and action in building a child friendly community in whatever context we are working.
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27) Quote from interview participant
31) Quote from interview participant
33) McLoughlin J
36) Quote from interview participant
40) Quote from interview participant