

Christchurch Parents, a summary of research carried out by the All Right? Campaign

Qualitative research was carried out in August 2015 to inform the development of key messages to support parents in greater Christchurch. This work is part of a package of support for parents funded by the Canterbury Earthquake Appeal Trust.

The research was undertaken through a series of six focus groups, each comprised of 6 – 9 participants moderated by Karen Selway from Opinions Market Research Ltd. Each group represented a range of parents by gender, age of dependents, socio-economic status, ethnicity and place of residence.

The qualitative research process provides a vehicle for uncovering more about parents' experiences (why things may be the way they are) and garner insights that are not otherwise possible. Qualitative data is not representative or generalisable, rather it presents the views of those participating in the focus groups.

Key findings

What does this research tell us about parents in Greater Christchurch?

- Parents are uncertain about parenting and their ability to parent well
- Parents feel they are judged as parents, yet are also judgmental of others
- Child wellbeing is not well understood by parents
- Parents are unaware of the impact of their own behaviour on their children and other family members
- Parents are isolated and this can be self-perpetuating
- Parents are tired
- Parents are affected by the ongoing post-earthquake stressors
- The influence of a parent's own childhood experience is strong but parents are not always aware of this in relation to their own children
- Parents have strong ideals about who can give them advice and what advice can be offered
- Fathers find it difficult to find their place and role as parents
- Parents have strategies which are working well for them

Parents are uncertain about parenting and their ability to parent well

Many new mothers described a feeling of being “left on your own” when leaving hospital with their newborn baby. They reported that they lacked confidence and would ask themselves if they were ‘doing it right?’

It's really hard as a new mum... (I) question myself

External guidance and support was sought at this time from Plunket, friends, mothers and GP's, however finding someone to relate to and whom parents could trust to provide support was not always easy. Both new mothers and fathers found advice (including from professionals) to be conflicting and not always helpful. This often added to their confusion and lack of confidence.

(Professionals) tell you what you are doing wrong. Shatters your self-esteem.

(The) information overload makes you feel incompetent.

New mothers identified they felt in need of nurture, saying they wanted support, encouragement and reassurance to build their confidence and encourage their learning.

Fathers of children aged from birth to five reflected that their wife or partner is their primary source of parenting information and they typically follow that person's lead. These fathers also sought guidance and support from their own mothers, however the difference in generations could cause conflict with their partner/wife. While fathers often attended antenatal courses to learn about parenting, their role at these courses was defined by needing to 'be there for the mother'. It is possible this has contributed to fathers looking to their wives/partners and mothers as a 'lead' in parenting.

For parents of older children, parenting became more challenging as their children reached their teens. Parents reported that they found it more difficult to connect with their teenage children. This was particularly true for fathers of thirteen to eighteen year olds. They often felt ill-equipped to relate to their children, especially if they had teenage girls. For mothers of thirteen to eighteen year olds there was a clear desire to have their child still connect with them for hugs and kisses and saying 'I love you'.

Parents feel they are judged as parents, yet are also judgmental of others

As well as feeling uncertain about their parenting ability, parents also said they felt judged in many circumstances. This was particularly evident if their child was misbehaving in front of others, or if a child would not settle. Parents also said they felt judged if their child's behaviours appeared outside of any perceived 'normal' boundaries. In some cases they even felt judged if their child's physical developments were outside the perceived norm (for example if their child was tall for their age).

Parents reported feeling judgement particularly from the other parent (mother or father), other parents in general and other adults. However equally, parents involved in this research were judgmental of others and showed limited understanding or compassion towards other parents. This was particularly evident when parents were asked to describe a child with poor wellbeing. Many parents focussed on external determinants (or the child's parental inputs) rather than the demeanour of the child.

Not giving child right food. Put kid in high chair with yoghurt and leave for two hours... not putting them to bed with pyjamas

Wandering around street and can be up to whatever time

People who can't afford milk and buy the 99 cents bottle of fizzy drink instead ...and so their health degenerates and they end up costing the system more. That's like a perpetuating cycle, it's the same people but you can't blame them because they don't know any better.

Child wellbeing is not well understood by parents

Positive child wellbeing was described by parents as, a child who was loved, healthy, happy, thriving, safe and secure. Poor child wellbeing was in turn described as, a child being scatty, scared, easily upset, sad, neglected and misbehaving. Parents often understood a child's poor wellbeing as something they could 'see'.

Thin clothes, crocs, no socks when it's eight degrees

While some of these descriptions are important indicators of a child's wellbeing, they are not always accurate determinants of overall wellbeing, either positive or poor. This indicates a limited understanding of what child wellbeing is. Parents also distinguished how well their children were doing generally by whether their children were achieving age appropriate tasks or activities and whether (or not) their child's behaviour was troublesome for them as the parent. Again, these are not always absolute determinants of a child's wellbeing, which is multi-dimensional and best considered over time.

Parents are unaware of the impact of their own behaviour on their children and other family members

It was evident that parents were not always aware of the way in which their own behaviours affected their children and in general parents did not view themselves as 'models' for their children.

(The) girls are very aggressive. (I) don't like arguing, but need to get my point across.

The exception however, was fathers of older teenagers who over time had noticed patterns of their children copying their behaviour.

In terms of wellbeing, parents often did not make a connection between looking after their own wellbeing as benefitting their children's wellbeing, or the importance of modelling self-care to their children. Whilst some parents have made this link many parents who were struggling or distracted had not. In these instances, the link was that good parenting is synonymous with good child behaviour, however parenting (of any kind) is not synonymous with poor child behaviour. Poor child behaviour was regularly seen as outside of a parent's influence.

Many parents said they did not often talk about parenting, but admitted that it helped a lot when they did so.

We ask how you are. How's work? How's the kids? But not, how's your parenting going?

Parents also reported needing to put on a brave face with regard to their parenting and its struggles. This may contribute to parents not having the capacity to think any deeper about their parenting or wellbeing, the clear measurements of milestones and getting everything

done day-to-day may be seen as the only tangible means of 'knowing' whether they are doing a good job.

Parents are isolated, and this can be self-perpetuating

Parents were clear that it was their responsibility to provide and care for their child. Trust was limited to a few people: self; husband/wife/partner; family; friends; school; GP; Plunket and antenatal course information.

There was evidence of support circles reducing for parents as children reach teenage years. Parents reported that while they used to be more connected to other parents through primary school, they were now not so engaged with their child's school or other parents.

For many, talking about parenting is a 'no go' topic, which they likened to discussing mental health. Many parents reported up-skilling on parenting through communications which meant they did not have to engage with others, for example, reading books, going online, using Facebook or watching television programmes. Yet when parents did open up and discuss parenting, even inside of the focus groups, it was seen as helpful

It's nice to realise you're not the only one.

It was good to stop listen and think and consider how you do things and how I do things, good or bad. Just sorta look at yourself now and again

Interestingly, many parents had engaged with antenatal courses, but not sought any other parenting course as a means of learning new ways.

I haven't done (a parenting course). It never really occurred to me that it's something I should do. I probably would've gotten something out of it.

When up skilling did occur it was generally at a time of crisis, rather than an everyday betterment exercise, and focused on building strong healthy relationships between parents and children. However any up-skilling proactively accessed was reported as being helpful at the time.

It seems that any unsolicited parenting support offered is often viewed with suspicion. A person has to be trusted and within a credible support framework in order to become involved with a child unless things have reached crisis point. Strangers particularly walk a fine line between being helpful and not. They are not allowed to touch the child unless in danger, offer advice or judge. The way in which strangers can help is by creating a distraction, giving a supportive smile, saying something kind or reassuring or laughing it off with the parent thus acknowledging that they understand and can empathise.

(There was a) Mum next to me, (her) toddler throwing a wobbly and another (having a) tantrum. Someone actually came and helped pack her groceries.

Even between parents there were indications of a sense of self-created isolation in that parents (who were in relationships) would sometimes work independently from each other, or crises would need to occur before partners worked together.

Realising that I am not the only one responsible for the child. Took me long time to realise that.

You either take her or I will throw her out the window... I felt I had to do it and (was) overprotective. (He said) I have been waiting for you to say I need help.

Parents are tired

This is a generation of parents described as the ‘sandwich’ generation, wedged between children, work, and finances and often taking some responsibility for their own parents or other family members. This was evident for the parents participating in this research. One parent described feeling “exhausted, overwhelmed and overcommitted”. The support these parents offer to their relatives is both physical and emotional, whether it’s helping them move house or deal with the Earthquake Commission (EQC) and insurance issues or providing support for health issues, it takes its toll.

A relative... has got nothing – renting, no family, husband died and we get called on a lot ... We just moved her last week to get another flat so we had to hire a trailer for her, spent a day and half last weekend moving her and so I find it quite exhausting listening to her talking about how she can’t cope.

I always thought my mum was so strong but she has just been a blubbing mess since February. She insists people don’t get counselling. She is like this all the time you know... and my Dad goes oh she will be right. I don’t think my siblings realise the impact on my mum. It’s hard for me to see that. When you see a role model crash like that it’s, crikey.

There is evidence that because parents worry a lot, perhaps more so post-earthquakes, they may not be focussing as much on their parenting. While they might want to, parents reported not prioritising spending time with their children and family. Parents also recognised that they do not have enough time out for themselves. For working fathers, there was some guilt around taking time for themselves. They felt they were leaving the mother with the children for longer and time out for themselves resulted in not seeing their children as much. However, parents who had taken time out for themselves recognised the benefits.

Sometimes it’s easier to deal with the individual problems if they come when you’re calm. If you’ve had a chance to cool down then you’re able to think more logically... (I’ve) had time to think about things during time out. (I) feel more ready to deal with it. More able to manage the situation.

For some mothers, paid work was considered a respite from parenting. This was also seen as a double edged sword in that extremely busy lives and preoccupation provide additional pressures.

Parents are affected by the ongoing post-earthquake stressors

There is evidence that parents are still faced with post-earthquake stress, financial issues are significant for many, compounded by the secondary stressors from the earthquake.

I think it is worse because to pay for all the repairs we do have less money to put towards children.

Prices go up but wages don't. Lack of money is a huge stress in the house. It's the biggest. It causes arguments and stress and pressure and (the children) pick up on that. Arguments about what to spend money on, why there is no money, arguments with no basis.

Parents described life as busier now with the added complexities of earthquake repairs, perhaps taking responsibility for their parents' earthquake repairs and ferrying children through road works to school and activities. Adding to this, some parents had struggled with the impact of the earthquakes which has meant additional pressure. Others were grieving the loss of neighbourhood friends (who were also parents of similar aged children) who had moved away with school closures or imminent closures also taking a toll.

My best friend she was really ill with her pregnancy so I would look after her kids. We were in each other's houses all the time... I was with her in the February earthquake and grabbed her daughter before she got squashed by a bookcase. She hugged me and our relationship deepened a bit more. But now she's moved away I feel like it's not the same anymore. Now when I want to go to see her I have to have at least half a tank of petrol and need an hour and a half to get there and back. We used to do the groceries together but now we have to schedule a date. The absence of closeness.

My kids are at split site schools one of them is at each site which is quite difficult dropping them off and stuff. It will be nice once it's completed. As a result of the changes that we have had the other kids have moved. (We) have to try to be quite positive.

It is clear that these additional stressors are distracting and contribute to parents feeling the need to 'put on a brave face'.

Some parents reported that while their children had struggled after the earthquakes, many perceived their children were okay now. However, quite severe anxiety was still being experienced by some children.

(My child) needs to take (medication) five nights out of seven. Still up to two or three in the morning. Comes in to make sure he knows where Mum and Dad is.

The older boy is back to his old self, happy and very social. I'm worried about my girl. We are working with the doctor to develop strategies. If she gets under any sort of stress she loses control, screams, can't deal with the anxiety or stress.

While parents showed sympathy for others who have been more badly affected than themselves by the earthquakes and related stressors, there was also real judgement of others. For example, there was a high level of awareness that there are children who are in compromised positions which have been made worse by the earthquakes, and while there was empathy for these children, their parents were often judged.

The influence of a parent's own childhood experience is strong but parents are not aware of this for their own children

In order to determine (among other things) what influences parenting, time during the interviews was spent considering the parents' own childhoods. While some of the parents interviewed remembered their childhood with great fondness, for others it brought back disturbing or sad memories. Some parents expressed a strong desire to parent their children differently from the way they had been parented.

I have a couple of scars that remind me of what I don't want to do to my kids.

Memories of their own childhood often related to feelings of being loved, wanted, cared for, parented and shown an interest in. This in turn often influenced the parents' own style of parenting including rules such as no shouting or arguing between parents or in front of the children. This was evident especially when their partner wanted to take a different approach.

Positive memories consisted of activities and quality time spent together. Examples included parents watching them play sport, tramping, hunting, fishing, gardening, learning new things together, having new experiences with their parents and spending time together as a family for example at mealtimes or during holidays.

Parents have strong views on who can give them advice and what advice can be offered

There appears to be a contradiction between parents wanting to be the best parents they can be and in turn being open to learning new parenting strategies.

Nobody is going to tell me how to parent.

As a part of the interviews parents were asked about the usefulness of parenting messages, parenting groups and courses and to identify who is best to offer advice.

It is friends and family with older children whom parents consider as their first sources of help. Yet fathers of teenagers said they also accept parenting messages from their children. However, parents' openness to messages about parenting seems largely limited to support they pro-actively seek, as opposed to that which is unsolicited.

I was so offended at what my sister said about not spending enough time with my kids. I don't think you comment on other peoples parenting. If they ask you for advice that's fine. But no one will ever appreciate you giving them parenting advice... No one wants to hear that.

Interestingly schools and antenatal courses were viewed as the most credible places for parenting messages to be made available. The least trusted sources of parenting information are family and friends who do not have children and government and non-government agencies.

As far as messages that are appropriate to communicate, it is seen to be acceptable to communicate tips around guiding and disciplining children. The kinds of messages, which should not be communicated; are those surrounding how best to love and nurture.

Fathers find it difficult to find their place and role as parents

A generation gap was evident between many fathers aged between 35 and 45 and their own fathers. Many in the younger age group spoke about being different to their own fathers. For example, it was evident that many of these fathers were hit during their own childhood but were adamant they did not want to be authoritarian in their parenting style or become parents who 'showed no emotion'. However, it was not always evident that they had learnt new parenting strategies, or sought to.

All my dad knew was to smack. I know another kid who never got smacked and he is the career criminal but I don't know whether that has anything to do with it. With the whole anti smacking bill, giving them a smack on the bum is not going to kill them but it might put you in jail

In terms of their own childhood, many of the fathers attending the interviews were aware they had needed to repress their own emotions as children, but said they did not want this for their own children. Relationships with their children were important and there is evidence this generation of fathers is currently redefining what it is to be a Dad.

Interestingly however, these fathers appear to take an inferior role in parenting, next to their wives or partners. While they have opinions on parenting, they are careful not to overrule mothers or do something that will interfere with the routine. This makes it difficult to suggest any different ways or perhaps to be actively involved.

You are going into a partnership but on different levels. My wife is immersed in it. You come home and it's like what's the game play here? You find yourself going what do we do here?

The perception that mothers are more 'expert' may arise from their immersion in the parenting role. They more often stay home with the children or work part-time, are more likely to attend parenting groups and are focussed on as the predominant parent during childbirth and post-natal care. Mothers can often assert themselves as being more skilled.

I think I know what I'm doing. My wife KNOWS what she's doing.

The comments my partner makes about the way I deal with things can be bad. I deal with it in my way.

I think as guys we are more ad hoc as well. We see a problem and we go and fix it. My wife's a gatherer of information, researcher, learner... My wife looks at everything and makes a more informed decision.

This tendency to follow the mother's lead is also true for fathers who are stay-at-home dads. Their attitudes and behaviour often reflected those of their partner or wife. A major difference between a mother's and father's parenting style however, was that fathers are often experiential in their parenting. Overall, fathers appeared more kinaesthetic in their learning about how to parent best.

If you try something and it doesn't work try something else

Fathers reported mainly receiving information on parenting, this regularly comes from the mother. Fathers will also get information from other parents who have experience themselves or from networks such as Facebook, books and on some occasions parenting courses. Fathers too relayed learning from their own childhood experiences and positive relationships with their children were more overtly discussed in the fathers' focus groups than they were in those of the mothers.

(My parents) didn't support me to go do sports. They didn't come to the games or give me the support I needed. I want to make sure I'm there for my kids.

But sometimes other factors such as work interfered with their ability to achieve these ideals.

It seems however that for some fathers of children aged five years and older, they had often started to build a more independent relationship with their children as the range of activities they could do with them expanded and the balance of childcare became shared. Ongoing though there were still dilemmas for them, particularly for fathers parenting girls approaching their teenage years - "how do I remain involved?"

Fathers were open to the idea of parenting courses, but preferably only on specific issues, which they cannot resolve and are causing significant problems. They suggest short session-based courses rather than any weekly/ongoing course being more useful.

Interestingly, when fathers were asked to choose printed parenting material, they regularly chose material printed with 'Dad', over those printed with 'Parent'.

Fathers' support networks were often about them and their needs rather than any family, child or parenting-related support network. Many fathers said they simply did not discuss parenting or child issues, however fathers participating in the focus groups said they enjoyed them and benefitted from attending (many saying they had never talked about parenting before).

I think I have a bit more confidence as well because I don't usually talk in front of other people. It was good to share my daddy experience with other blokes as well because it's not something I usually do.

Parents have strategies which are working well for them

Parents regularly spoke about the importance of feeling connected to people in their community, particularly other parents with similarly-aged children as well as their child's school.

It has helped connecting with another mum who has the same philosophy as me. Given me confidence. Similar mum with a similar experience – not the only one doing this.

Quite a few mums down my street. We all are connected.

Some of the reasons parents like to feel connected to other parents is because they are able to pick up helpful advice and discuss parenting, especially when parenting feels unmanageable. Many parents said that talking about the challenges of parenting is extremely difficult but when they do they feel reassured that they are 'normal' and not alone.

Sometimes we don't get it right. I have not stayed calm with my son and have shout "don't cry!" You need honest reassurance (that) you are a great mother.

Parents expressed finding it difficult to both ask for and accept any support, but they were often happy to provide support (this was especially true for mothers)– offering childcare for example, and when they had accepted help, it was very meaningful.

Someone rocks up with a meal. Most incredible thing. One meal.

Possibly the most important person to provide support is a partner, however this was not always evident. Those with partners talked about the value in being able to work together as a team by providing each other with time out or taking over when one parent was stressed or becoming frustrated. They also talked about the positive effects that doing activities as a family and taking time out together as a couple had on them.

Parents often iterated positive experiences with their children when they were simply taking notice. They also agreed that such positive experiences with their children don't have to be long, arduous nor expensive.

(I) just look at them and am grateful that they are healthy - you realise how precious it is and how cool it is that they are healthy and happy.

While parents worried about staying connected with their teenage children, some parents had found innovative ways to do so. This example combines technology (familiar for the participant's daughter) and a shared goal.

My daughter and I have been using an app called couch to 5km. she asked me to do it and I jumped at that because I'm always looking for ways to connect with her. You start and it tells you to run and walk and eventually you get up to 5km. I found that's been really good. It's free and takes 35 minutes three times a week. And I get to do it with her. You get a trainer and everything

Parents appeared to enjoy their children and parenting when they reminded themselves that children are learning how to interact and behave in every situation. Rather than focussing on misbehaviour, they focussed on respecting their child's perspective and the relationship between themselves and their child.

(It's) important to remember (we) cannot expect (children) to be adults. (They're) not manipulative. There is a reason if (they) can't calm themselves down, (this is) our job.

And many parents talked about enjoying having fun with their children, or watching their children having fun and laughing, even when this was difficult, for example a child having increased anxiety since the earthquakes.

(I) try and remain strong and have fun. We do heaps of stuff with the kids, work through the week and then do things with family and friends, just try to enjoy things. Like when snow was falling.

And while parents enjoyed time out for themselves, they also wanted their children to share and learn this.

Fishing. It's like watching nature breathe and I want my son to feel that and become part of it.