The Commonwealth Government’s Stronger Families and Communities Strategy recognises that in the vast majority of cases the wellbeing of young children is best met through the family within the context of a supportive community. Given the significance of early childhood experiences for healthy development, the Strategy emphasises the importance of early intervention, including the provision of access to effective parent education programs.

Of course, the existence of early intervention programs does not guarantee their accessibility or effectiveness. As Weston (1995) noted, accessibility depends on the level of match between characteristics of a service and those of its potential users. Thus, accessibility will be limited to the wealthy if the service is very expensive, and to those with a good command of English or those who can bring along an interpreter if only English is spoken at the service. Similarly, location, hours of operation, waiting times and appointment delays may or may not represent barriers to service use, depending on such factors as distance to be travelled, modes of transport available, time pressures, and possibly, flexibility of work hours.

Other, more subtle factors include the level of cultural sensitivity and respect shown by service providers, as perceived by potential consumers. And it goes without saying that a service will be ineffective if it fails to address the underlying needs confronting the consumer; some of these needs will be culture-specific.

Thus, in order to be effective, early intervention strategies directed towards enhancing parental competence need to be sensitive to the factors that can promote or undermine parenting in different cultural contexts. Such issues are particularly salient in Australia, given the cultural diversity of its families, but little is known about the everyday concerns that parents in different circumstances are confronting in raising their children.

In order to throw light on these experiences, the Australian Institute of Family Studies participated in an international study (the International Study of Schools, Parents and Children: ISPCS) the aim of which was to identify cross cultural differences and similarities in parenting beliefs, values, daily concerns and behaviour.
The study includes teams from the United States, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Poland and Sweden.

**Parenting-21 study**

The Australian component of this international study, *Parenting-21* (a title that refers to this 21st century), began in 1996 with two groups each of 60 Melbourne-based families. Anglo families, defined as comprising a child and parents born in Australia, with grandparents born in either Australia or the United Kingdom, were recruited via newspaper advertisements. Vietnamese families, defined as comprising a child born in Australia, with parents and grandparents born in Vietnam, were recruited by the Vietnamese interviewer. Families from both groups had at least one child aged from six months to eight years. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with parents, mostly mothers.

Then in 1997, the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Service, of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, provided a grant to extend the *Parenting-21* study to include 69 Torres Strait Islander families and other key informants. This component of the study involved a discussion with one extended family group from each of the five islands chosen in the Torres Strait. In addition, focus group discussions were held with men and women who were “elders” (with adult children), “experienced parents” (whose eldest child was in secondary school), and “young parents” (with an eldest child in primary school), as well as “key informants” (all of whom were service providers).

From the information provided by participants in the three groups, this article identifies factors that enhance and hinder parents as they fulfil their child rearing responsibilities.

Similar sources of influences were identified by parents in the three groups. These are classified into (1) broad external factors, including support networks and employment-related issues, and (2) family focused factors such as the structural characteristics of the family, its internal dynamics, and personal attributes of family members. The same sources of influences were sometimes seen as supportive, sometimes as detrimental, and sometimes as both.
External sources of influences

Socio-cultural context

Parents’ views and models about child rearing are shaped by the culture in which they themselves were raised. Concomitantly, there is a social expectation for parents to adopt the beliefs and practices of the wider society in which they live. This generation of Vietnamese and Torres Strait Islander (TSI) parents were thus faced with two conflicting socio-cultural expectations: the need to preserve their culture of origin and the need to adapt to mainstream culture.

A case in point is the issue of discipline which was raised by some parents who found that the introduction of “white man’s law” had intruded and compromised parenting rights and generally contributed to difficulties in managing children’s behaviour:

“If you touch them [children], you definitely get into trouble. I think the system when they actually put that into place, [they] had never done their homework properly . . . So they actually just made the rule because of, maybe, some incident that had happened in mainstream Australia and they never realised what would happen. They never really understood how the changes would affect people from the Torres Strait, because you’ve got kids now that are actually running amok. The parenting rights, they have been taken away, you’re not allowed to [physically punish] your kid.” (TSI young father)

“We didn’t have laws [on child abuse] and with my kids now there’s laws you know. You hit a child, you go to court.” (TSI young mother)

Perceptions of contrasting disciplinary practices between their country of origin and Australia, and the long-term impact on their children of the “Australian way”, was also expressed by some Vietnamese parents:

“We came from Vietnam to live in Australia – East to West – and there are some cultural conflicts that create some confusion and difficulties in handling and rearing children.” (Vietnamese parent, 16 years residence)

“Discipline – how to raise the children in a democratic way but not to lose them, [not] to make them uncontrollable” (Vietnamese parent, 18 years residence)

Cultural mores in Australia, which to some extent still entail the expectation that men will be the main breadwinners, and mothers the main child rearers, can also undermine the confidence of parents whose circumstances do not fit this model. This was clearly expressed by an Anglo father who was employed as a shift-worker. While his hours of work enabled him to be more actively involved in parenting, he described his sense of social rejection in the following way:

“It’s difficult being a male looking after children . . . I find in the community that it’s set up a lot more for women looking after children. People almost look at you and think – well, what are you doin’ with them? Where’s your wife?” (Anglo father)

Despite these competing expectations between culture of origin and mainstream Australia, the comments of Torres Strait Islander parents in particular suggested that their immediate community played a large part in assisting parents in their child rearing responsibilities. The individual communities in the Torres Strait are small and some parents felt that this fostered a strong community spirit and sense of neighbourliness, with an accompanying acceptance of responsibility to look out for each other and to be vigilant about the wellbeing of each other’s children.

“You’re not worried about your child like people are down south. I wouldn’t be worried about my child. She could be running about in the middle of the village but I know she’s still safe. Even families that aren’t really directly – like blood – related to me, they would look after her.” (TSI young mother)

“During school holidays the whole community, we all go up to meet the children at the air-strip to show them they are important.” (TSI key informant)
Community infrastructure and basic amenities

A strong community will have in place policies and services that support families in meeting members’ needs and raising healthy children (Bowes and Hayes 1999; Brennan 1999; McGurk 1995). Each of the three groups of parents emphasised the importance of the availability and accessibility of community infrastructure and services:

“We live in an area where we’re close to public transport and shops. It’s great in terms of being a mother living here because you don’t feel isolated.” (Anglo parent)

“Now I can leave my child at child care to attend English class – have a chance to improve my English, meet people, go out . . .” (Vietnamese mother, 7 years residence)

“Child care is too expensive and difficult to find.” (Vietnamese parent, 13 years residence)

“Recreation facilities are far away from where we live. Because community houses are laid out in a ribbon shape, people at one end are a fair way from the other end where various recreation places like basketball court and volleyball courts are located.” (TSI parent)

With the lack of secondary educational facilities on the islands, Torres Strait Islander parents had little choice but to send their children “down south”. This was a major concern to some parents who missed being with their children, worried about their inability to monitor their children’s behaviour, and expressed concerns about the problems faced by the children themselves in handling multiple and major transitions – from an island to a mainland culture, from childhood to adolescence, and from primary to secondary school:

“If kids go away they come back different – different teaching and discipline. It’s not the parents’ fault, they [the children] go to get an education – the houseparents [at boarding schools] are not as tough, kids here [on the islands] follow their parents.” (TSI experienced father)

“The kids mix with the wrong type of people. The teenagers might learn to smoke and drink and all that type of thing. It happens when some of them are away at boarding school.” (TSI key informant)

Some Torres Strait Islander parents highlighted the absence of very basic amenities that mainstream Australians would take for granted. To Garbarino and Kostelnky (1995) such services are essential “passive” prevention measures, requiring no action on the part of parents to protect their children. According to these authors, lack of basic services creates inequities in child health, given variations between the private resources of families and between parental skills and motivation:

“People are still living in them holes, coconut leaf and crumpled iron and bamboo shack building, and it’s not healthy for the kids, but they’re [the parents] trying their best to grow up kids in that house.” (TSI key informant)

“Some of the young families just live in a house only just got a stove. There’s no electricity connected to it so you just depend on your next door neighbour and all that, and it doesn’t give you that self esteem or that confidence in yourself to call yourself a good parent.” (TSI experienced mother)

“When the barge comes in, and the kids, they look forward to fresh fruit, bread and they love their fruit and they love their vegies. So we just don’t get enough of that here. Not enough unless you’re going to be first-in-first-served sort of thing when the barge comes in, so that’s difficult.” (TSI mother)

The bane of modern technology

Reflecting a general worldwide trend, watching television and videos were becoming popular forms of recreation, not only for children but also for the whole family. According to some Islander parents, the introduction of television and videos was responsible for the demise of activities that were seen as important in nurturing community spirit and sense of community belonging by taking away the opportunity to get together and “yarn”. This was seen as one vital way of passing on traditional beliefs and values:

“Before when we finish tea we move from one house to another to have a yarn. Now television – people stay home and watch TV.” (TSI parent)

“More disruption came in when you got the TV. Like before, we go and sit with grandfathers out on the beach. Our grandfathers were telling us stories and myths and legends and all that. That’s why we have some in our heads, and the younger generation haven’t. They go to watch videos.” (TSI key informant)

In addition, Torres Strait Islander parents expressed concern about the impact of television violence on their children. While several studies have highlighted a concern about the effect of television violence on children’s development (Ambert 1997), in the Parenting-21 study this matter was raised only by Islander parents:

“Children are watching a lot of violent videos these days . . . and when they go outside they tend to be playing with those sticks pretending they are guns or something, and all are more aggressive than before.” (TSI experienced mother)

“One kid hit another one with a broom handle and nearly killed him. Just because they watched a kung fu video. And the kids called it the chop.” (TSI key informant)

Support networks

The availability of support networks was a dominant theme across the three communities. Access to informal and formal support has been widely recognised as fundamental to positive outcomes for both children and parents (Cochran 1990), and as a potentially fruitful coping resource in relation to parenting children (Crnic and Acevedo 1995).

Formal sources of support identified by the three communities included community agencies and professionals as well as literature on child care and parenting, while informal sources of support included extended family and friendship networks. The type of support mentioned covered material, practical and emotional help as well as the provision of information. However, more than any form of help, what emerges from the data is an appreciation of practical help, particularly babysitting, received from informal sources:
“We have lots of family close by as well . . . M’s mother comes every week to look after the children, they’re not in formal care.” (Anglo parent)

“If you don’t have a babysitter, they’re [extended family] always there. They don’t mind, and most aunts and uncles you don’t have to ask, you just come and drop them off.” (TSI mother)

“If I needed to take someone to the doctor at night I could rely on a neighbour to watch the kids for me.” (Anglo parent)

“I have put a lot of effort into developing a network of people with children of a similar age, so that’s made it easier to have a child.” (Anglo parent)

“I’m still getting heaps of community support – the school, the church, the shire and my GP.” (Anglo parent)

“Like many of my friends [newly arrived in this country with no family support] we received help from Vietnamese community workers who specialised with migrant resettlement, and this includes family matters and child rearing.” (Vietnamese parent, 4 years residence)

While Anglo and Vietnamese parents used formal and informal sources of support concurrently, in the Torres Strait, the family was typically the first port of call before formal support was sought:

“They seek support among themselves, family first, brother and sister of the parents.” (TSI key informant)

“I talk to my husband or his family or, if it gets out of hand, to a social worker.” (TSI mother)

Moreover, in seeking out formal support services, Islander parents emphasised the need to approach people they could trust with a particular emphasis on people with experience. “Experience” was defined by the parents according to age, professional background (doctors, child welfare workers, social workers, teachers, priests and counsellors, as well as community leaders versed in the “Ilan” way), or earlier exposure to similar familial circumstances as themselves:

“I always talk to my older sisters and their husbands and find it out because I don’t have experience.” (TSI young mother)

“The priest is always there, to give you counsel.” (TSI elder male)

“Someone who is in the professional area that deals with students, like the school teacher.” (TSI young father)

Despite their emphasis on informal networks, some parents in the Torres Strait mentioned the need for programs/workshops that can support parents in fulfilling their tasks either on a continuing basis or as an early intervention program such as: the need for a parental workshop on helping children with homework and encouraging them to go to school; a workshop for newly married couples or young parents to teach them skills about raising children and about budgeting and nutrition; a health education workshop for all parents; and a workshop for fathers to enhance communication skills (“because of lack of communication, fathers don’t sit and talk about their problems, but rather go drinking”).

While sources of support were typically viewed as helpful, some sources were occasionally seen as ineffective (for example, given the clash in old and new cultures) or detrimental:

“Knowledge about child rearing and parenting from family members may not be appropriate to new country.” (Vietnamese parents, 16 years residence)

“Older people, for example, uncle drinks and says ‘I want you to be like me’.” (TSI mother)

“If you smack the kids the grandparents’ll say ‘ah’, and if the kids cry they’ll say ‘here lolly here’ when you’re trying to teach them not to eat much sweet and stuff.” (TSI young mother)

“Teachers – to be seen drunk in public and shouting and carrying on because that’s very important role that them fella have in the children’s school.” (TSI experienced mother)

**Employment-related issues**

Parents’ breadwinning role is not only a major resource in raising healthy children but also a key means by which parents participate in society. As such, parents may derive considerable self-esteem and social support from paid work which can have positive flow-on effects for children. Nevertheless, the demands of paid work may at times compete with those linked with family life.

It is thus not surprising that themes concerning the benefits and difficulties surrounding paid work emerged in parents’ stories. In particular, parents discussed work conditions (hours, flexibility and income) in relation to themselves and their partners and the psychological rewards and costs of paid work. For some parents being unemployed or having stopped working to care for children created both financial and non-financial pressures:

“We’re financially comfortable which makes it much much easier. My partner works part-time . . . and I’ve got flexible hours, so that makes it much easier.” (Anglo parent)

“I think the fact that I get six days off work in between shifts makes it easier. It’d be a lot more difficult if I didn’t have that. I find it very satisfying just watching the kids grow up.” (Anglo parent)

“Oh I love working. The satisfaction of being back and working is fantastic for me. I think I’d be bored out of my brain if I was still at home.” (Anglo parent)

“Well, I’ve got some balance of work and child care in my life. I’d really hate not to work. Even though it seems very difficult to work, I wouldn’t like not working.” (Anglo parent)

“I can go out to work and have social contact.” (Vietnamese parent, 12 years residence)
“From my work I gain knowledge and experiences about children such as family, parents, interrelationship, etc.” (Vietnamese parent, 15 years residence)

“The things that make my life more difficult is the time my husband is not here. If I know he’s coming home at 6 o’clock at night then that’s fine. But when it’s sort of 7:30 to 8 o’clock, or he’s going to work on weekends, that’s when it makes it harder for me.” (Anglo parent)

“I work full-time and I can’t have as much time as I want for my children. I always struggle between my duty as a parent and my career.” (Vietnamese parent, 15 years residence)

“Nowadays parents have to work and so have little time to spend with their kids – probably only have the night to spend with kids and communicate and all that. For working parents, it is very hard.” (TSI key informant)

“Financially, we are not well-off and it makes [parenting] difficult. I am not working much and am not earning as I was, and when you have a child you want to give them everything, and financial concern makes that hard. Those sorts of restrictions can feel limiting.” (Anglo parent)

“We are lower income people. We are poor materially and financially. It is difficult, especially now that my son is going to high school – there’s school fees, uniform and many other needs . . .” (Vietnamese parent, 14 years residence)

“Raising your child alone by yourself, especially when the child is sick, there is no one for you to share your worry, your concern.” (Vietnamese parent, 3 years residence)

“We received help from Vietnamese community workers who specialised with migrant resettlement, and this includes family matters and child rearing.”

“Family-focused sources of influences

The structural characteristics of the family along with its internal dynamics and personal attributes of its members were seen as important factors influencing parenting. At times these were portrayed as being closely linked with access to support networks and the balancing of work and family life (discussed earlier).

Structural characteristics of the family

While some parents in couple families regretted the fact that their partner’s work commitments interfered with their parenting role, some single parents in the study highlighted the difficulties they faced in not having a partner to support them in their parenting role, most particularly in the provision of emotional support:

“Raising your child alone by yourself, especially when the child is sick, there is no one for you to share your worry, your concern.” (Vietnamese parent, 3 years residence)

“I think being alone – being a single parent – makes it hard . . . because you’ve sort of got no one to fall back on and no one to express what you’re feeling.” (Anglo parent)

“Because I’m a single parent, I feel it’s important to have that family. A child has to have to grow up in a family...
Characteristics of the child

Children’s characteristics, including their apparent temperament, not only affect the way parents interact with them but also contribute to parents’ satisfaction. Some parents were delighted with their children’s behaviour, while others found their children’s challenging behaviour not only frustrating but also a possible reflection of their own incompetence as parents:

“I just think the child makes it so easy and satisfying to be a parent, because if they’re a lovely child – as I think J is – well, all the work is just rewarded.” (Anglo parent)

“I have two good and lovely children – a happy family.” (Vietnamese parent, 5 years residence)

“Most of the time I am very patient and deal with children in a warm and calm way. But sometimes N is too naughty and stubborn. I become angry and lose control, I yell at him and sometimes hit him a little bit.” (Vietnamese parent, 8 years residence)

“I don’t always manage his bad behaviour very well.” (Anglo parent)

Obedience and health were strongly emphasised by Vietnamese parents as sources of satisfaction:

“They’re good, obedient children. I am satisfied.” (Vietnamese parent, 14 years residence)

“I have a good child – intelligent, obedient and healthy.” (Vietnamese parent, 14 years residence)

Parenting was seen as a demanding but also rewarding experience, with some parents focusing on the difficulties and others on the joys of raising their children.

Parental qualities and characteristics

Satisfaction with parenting was closely intertwined with an acknowledgment from the parents of their own personal qualities, a variety of which were seen as promoting a sense of empowerment to deal with the multifaceted tasks of parenting:

“Being extremely well organised, planning my menus and keeping the children under a tight rein – keeping up the discipline especially over the three days a week I work, and learning to enjoy parenting more.” (Anglo parent)

“Personal experience makes me stronger (more endurance, tolerance) I can adopt the new ways easier, quicker.” (Vietnamese parent, 16 years residence)
A number of older mothers referred to their age in positive and/or negative terms. Maturity and financial resources were considered to enhance parenting, while tiredness, career concerns and entrenched work attitudes and values were seen as detrimental:

“Oh, things like being an older person. I was 37 when I had G. . . I’ve sort of been there, done that – having travelled, having established a career, and having done a lot of the things that would compete with the time that is required to raise children. So I’m feeling that it’s a phase of my life that I’m really ready for and I feel that I know myself very well.” (Anglo parent)

“In being older parents we have more affluence and are more established . . . Being older does help me to explain to the kids some aspects of the world the way it is.” (Anglo parent)

“Age. I’m nearly 47, and with age, physical tiredness. The pullback to career and material gain is always there.” (Anglo parent)

“I guess we’re older. We had her when we were older so we’re more set in our ways. My personality . . . makes it difficult to be a parent . . . very self-centred and very selfish, and to have to accommodate a child is extremely difficult.” (Anglo parent)

The inherent demanding nature of parenting necessitates a high level of effort, energy and good health. Lack of these personal attributes were considered to undermine parenting:

“When I’m sick, my spirit is very low. I worry for my child.” (Vietnamese parent, 4 years residence)

“Well I suppose the difficult things is just my own health. I wish I had been more healthy because then I’d be able to do more . . . and have some energy to just play with M or do things . . . Often I feel that we don’t go out a lot because I couldn’t be bothered, you know. I’m just tired or whatever.” (Anglo parent)

Summary

Parenting was seen as a demanding but also rewarding experience, with some parents focusing on the difficulties and others on the joys of raising their children. While the personal attributes of the child and parent were often seen as important factors in determining which of these experiences predominated, so too were other factors within and beyond the family, most particularly the level of partner’s support, family type, work–family pressures, access to formal and informal support networks and the community as a whole. At times the classification of comments in the various themes was “fuzzy” because of the strong interconnection between the various sources of influence.

The strong interplay of individual parental and child characteristics and contextual factors ultimately moulds parenting behaviour and its effectiveness. Because the paramount goal of parenting is to promote the development and wellbeing of children, it is crucial that people involved in the design and delivery of family and children’s services have a thorough understanding of factors and measures that help to enhance parenting. Moreover, in multicultural Australia, support needs to be sensitive to cultural differences and to the struggles some parents experience in trying to accommodate both their own culture of origin and that of mainstream Australia.

The comments of the parents thus highlight the need to provide multi-layered, flexible and culturally sensitive approaches to supporting families. As such, this study affirms the recommendations advanced by Fraser and Galinsky (1997) that support for parenting be directed at various system levels – the individual, group, family, community and society. The need for community support was particularly emphasised by the Torres Strait Islander parents who lacked some important basic services that support family life and who saw child rearing as a shared communal responsibility.

Together, the parents’ stories underscore the fact that strong families and strong communities go hand in hand.

References


Ruth Weston is the Manager of the Research Operations Unit at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and Grace Soriano is a Research Officer in the Unit. Violet Kolar managed the Institute’s Parenting-21 study until its completion in 2000.