

**Parenting groups as sources of social capital:
their patterns of use and outcomes for
Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal mothers of
young children**

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Summary

Motherhood involves significant lifestyle upheavals and ongoing challenges. Though motherhood can be isolating, social support is beneficial to the health and well-being of mothers. This holds for disadvantaged mothers, though they are likely to suffer both significant life stressors and a lack of social support. Whilst informal networks are often examined in the context of social support and parenting, this thesis examines two types of group-based formal parenting support service, namely playgroups and parent support groups. There is a dearth of Australian research on parenting groups, and up-to-date national participation figures are unavailable. Research examining parenting groups that target disadvantaged and Aboriginal families is scarce.

The broad aim of this thesis is to examine the ways in which parenting groups operate as supportive resources for mothers. Towards this aim, two key research questions are addressed: which mothers participate in parenting groups; and what are the outcomes of participation? The thesis employs a mixed method design, capitalising on the data condensing advantages of quantitative methods and the contextual specificity of qualitative methods. The quantitative component addresses the research questions on a national scale, using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children to compile participation figures, as well as assess the outcomes of participation in terms of mothers' health and well-being. Qualitative interviews with Aboriginal and disadvantaged mothers participating in facilitated parenting groups, give insight into the ways in which these mothers engage with parenting groups and the perceived benefits of participation.

Social capital, which is concerned with social networks and their benefits, is the theoretical framework for the thesis. Much of the relevant parenting literature refers to the concept of social support. However, social support was found to be insufficient as a conceptual lens for the purposes of this research. The work of three key theorists, Coleman, Putnam and Bourdieu are drawn on. It is argued that Bourdieu, who takes into account the influence of the social structure on access to social capital, is most relevant here. Bourdieu's broader theory of social practice is also drawn on for its insights into the wider implications of the social structure on individuals' location within it. Putnam's concepts of bonding and bridging social capital, and their extension, linking social capital, are here integrated with Bourdieu towards a theoretical framework that is analytically useful, both in terms of understanding structural constraints on the distribution of social capital and the ways in which such constraints can be overcome.

The research found that playgroup use is much more prevalent than parent support group use, a finding that appears to be influenced by perceptions of playgroups as offering child-related advantages, rather than focusing solely on mothers. This pattern persists among disadvantaged and Aboriginal mothers, though they appear to begin participating in playgroups later than more affluent, non-Aboriginal mothers. A positive relationship was found between playgroup

participation and better health ratings, congruent with other research evidence of strong links between social participation and health.

The qualitative analyses found that both supported playgroups and parent support groups can offer Aboriginal and disadvantaged mothers benefits in the form of peer support, information and guidance. In addition to child-related benefits, playgroups promoted family social capital. The Aboriginal parent support group had far-reaching impacts on mothers in terms of empowerment. Expert facilitators were found to be key sources of support, offering crucial bridging and linking social capital that disadvantaged mothers' informal networks are less able to provide. It is argued that the potential of parenting groups as quality support services for disadvantaged mothers may be maximised by combining the strengths of supported playgroups and parent support groups in a single model. The thesis concludes that, though parenting groups will not ameliorate the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage, nor surpass informal support networks in importance, they can be a valuable source of support that can make a difference on an individual basis.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Wendy Shulver
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This paper uses unit record data from *Growing Up in Australia, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children*. The study is conducted in partnership between the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The findings and views reported in this paper are those of the author and should not be attributed to FaHCSIA, AIFS or the ABS.

The Aboriginal component of this thesis includes data from an evaluation project on which the maternal and child health team at the Aboriginal health centre involved collaborated. The contribution of these Aboriginal health workers to this research is acknowledged. Ownership of the cultural and intellectual property rights of the Aboriginal participants in this research is acknowledged.

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