

Parent Peer Support in Child Welfare: A Family-inclusive Practice

Jessica Cocks, Life Without Barriers

Lou Johnston, Family Inclusion Strategies Hunter (FISH)

“ We had to learn from our own situations, and we were able to get a good outcome [and] able to find our way through using the services. Being able to use that experience ourselves is what I believe got us into these positions where we can share that with other people who don't know the system either. ”



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This work takes place on the land of the Awabakal people. We acknowledge the Awabakal people. We pay our respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.



Parent Peer Support Project

- Trial project, March 2019 to October 2020
- Hunter Valley, NSW, Australia
- 4 Parent Partners with lived experience of child protection and out-of-home care systems providing peer support
- 1 Coordinator providing support and supervision

“ I never ever, ever judge....Never. Because that's the most horrible feeling in the world. So even if someone's saying something, doing something that I don't agree with, that's not my call. They still deserve the support. That's really important to me, that I support, no matter what.... I will never ever judge them. I'll just treat them like a parent. ”



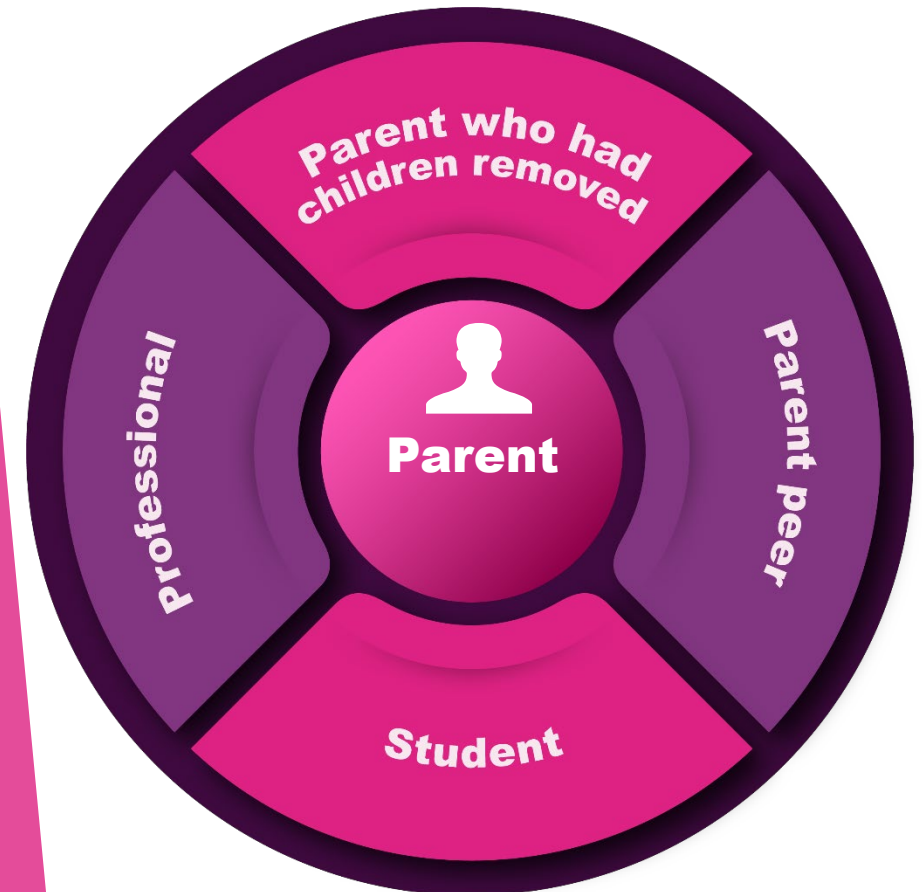
Research Project

Experiences of Parent Peers

- October 2019 - October 2020
- Participants: 4 parent partners
- Method: 4 focus groups
- Research focus:
 - Benefits of peer support
 - Establishing and maintaining parent peer support initiatives
 - Types of support parents need most
 - Integrating peer support into the child welfare system

This project builds on research conducted by this team in 2015-16 about parents' experiences of child protection and OOHC systems and findings about support & isolation. [Report](#)

“ I thought returning to court would be traumatic, but I was actually okay. I was nervous the first time but, after doing the first day, I felt really good. I suppose, going back for a good reason. Like, if you were going back for a bad reason it would be like reliving it all over again. But, going back, I've had closure. Like I'm in a good place now, so it was fine. I didn't have any worries.”



Preliminary Themes

“ We’re not going to save everybody.... I think this has been our motto... we might just help one person, and that’s what it’s about.”

SUPPORT VARIES BETWEEN PEOPLE AND CIRCUMSTANCES

- Methods to support and advocate for other parents
- Timing and pace – e.g., stage of “journey”
- Style and approach
- Extending support & advocacy

Some people are at the beginning of the journey when they’re very angry and they’re not ready to take that on. Or even listen to anyone else. They just want to get their feelings out. And you have to be aware of where everyone’s at, on their journey, I think, and respect that.

When parents are very negative about caseworkers, that’s not going to get you anywhere. You don’t have to like them, but you have to work with them ... You’ve got to work-with and be open.

I feel more validated as a person and as a parent ... I felt human again. I felt like a worthwhile mother again and, from this project, I feel, yeah, I feel valued.

[About some lawyers] There’s always big smiles, ‘hi’, and then listening to them tell other people about me personally. It’s not this doom and gloom thing anymore ... it’s been quite nice that she recognises my changes and what I’m doing.

A hard question I get asked is how long it took to get my children home... I explain that I took 12 months to really work on myself... [and] another 12 months before the kids came home... It’s really hard to not leave someone deflated when they are at the beginning of their journey.

DEVELOPING AND STRENGTHENING IDENTITIES

- As a parent
- As a parent who had children removed
- As a parent peer
- As a professional

LEARNING FROM “HARD” EXPERIENCES

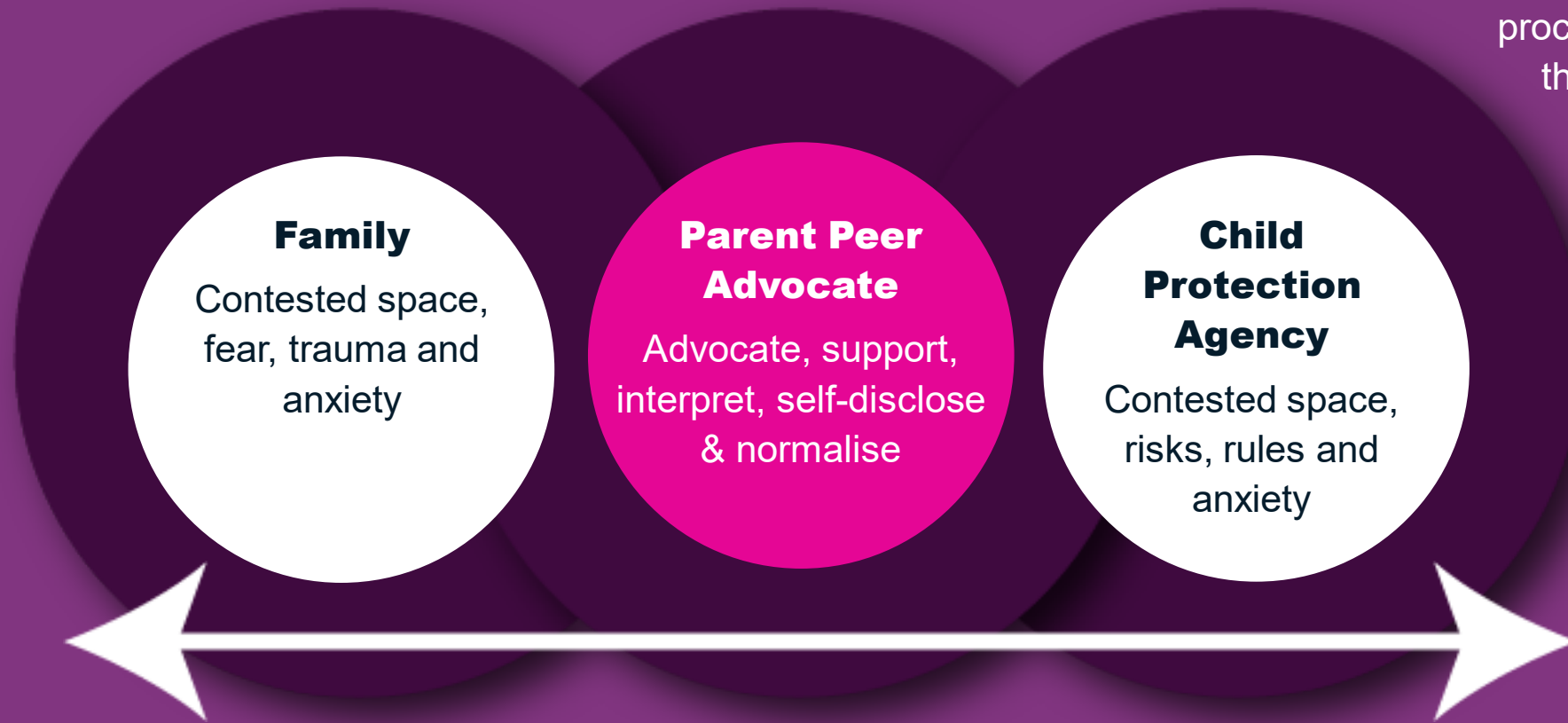
- “Hard”, challenging, and difficult experiences
- Lessons – knowledge & skills
- Achievements and successes: “turning negative into positive”, “no more doom and gloom”

RELATING AND ACCEPTING ARE CRITICAL INFLUENCES

- With parents
- With other parent peers
- With other people around parents (e.g., caseworkers, lawyers) – inc. role tension and acceptance



Parent Peer Support as Family-Inclusive Practice



Credible messenger: the peer parent advocate educates and influences parents and workers. Providing a bridge between parents and the system, building hope for parents and caseworkers.

Family inclusion is the active and meaningful participation of parents and family in the lives of children. It is a process and lived experience over time that helps ensure children's family relationships are not lost.

Family Inclusion Strategies, 2015

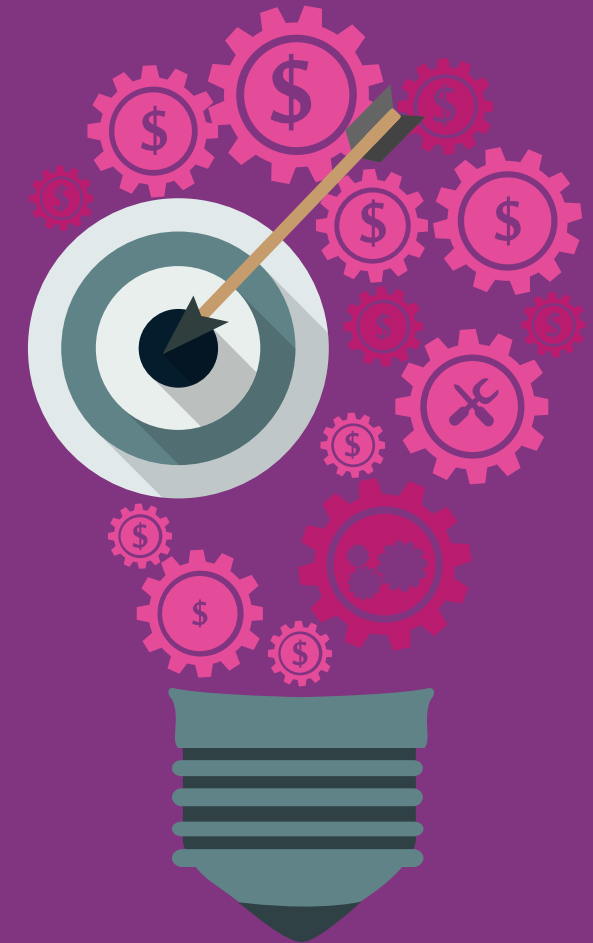
“ She had some trouble a while back and she had to tell her caseworker what had happened, but because I helped her word it and said to her, ‘be honest’, ‘be upfront’, like, ‘tell her what’s happened before they find out’, Two years ago, I would have said, ‘oh, don’t tell them, don’t tell them’. But now, no, you’ve got to tell them. And, like, she’s changed everything about how she approached them, and it worked [laughing]. ”

(Cocks, 2020; Figure 1: Parent Peer Support and Advocacy – reducing power imbalances, building trust)



Further reading & links

- Better Care Network and IPAN. 2020. International Review of Parent Advocacy in Child Welfare: Strengthening Children’s Care and Protection Through Parent Participation. New York.
- Cocks, J., Stoker, L., Common, S., Evans, R., Geale, A., Johnston, L., Kime, F., Ross, N. (in press). *From little things big things are coming – the Parent Peer Support Project*, Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter, Life Without Barriers and University of Newcastle, Australia.
- Cocks, J. (2018). *If a community values it’s children, it must cherish their parents: Family inclusive initiatives in child welfare*, Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, Canberra
- Cocks, J. (2020). “Parent and Family Advocacy in Child Protection. A pathway to better outcomes for kids”, in Yarnold, J., Hussey, K., Guster, K., Davey, A. (Eds), *Policy Futures: a reform agenda*, University of Queensland and Winston Churchill Memorial Trust.
- Information Resources for Parents and Family – developed by the Parent Peer Support Project and hosted by Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter (FISH)
- Ross, N., Cocks, J., Johnston, L., Stoker, L. (2017). *No voice, no opinion nothing: Parent perspectives when children are placed in out-of-home care*, University of Newcastle and Life Without Barriers..



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Jessica.cocks@lwb.org.au

Lou.johnston@newcastle.edu.au