

**Small Voices, Significant Stakeholders: Young Children's Experiences of Program  
Participation and Family Life during Involvement in a Parenting Program**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research on parenting programs rarely focuses on the children's perspectives and little is understood about how children experience these programs or the changes that may occur in their families during program participation. Further, the voices of disadvantaged or vulnerable young children have often been excluded from research on issues that directly affect their lives. To address this research gap, the current study adopted a longitudinal, mixed method design with a primary focus on the experiences of disadvantaged 3- to 5-year-old children (N = 5) who attended an attachment-based parenting program. Two other early childhood settings, a supported playgroup (N = 3) and preschool (N = 10), were included as comparison groups. A range of child-friendly, accessible, and valid qualitative data collection methods such as child-photography and child interviews were used to capture children's perspectives of program participation and everyday home life. In addition, standardised, quantitative measures were used to assess relevant aspects of the children's social development, particularly the quality of their peer interactions as well as children's attachment narrative representations of their attachment relationships.

The findings revealed that children's descriptions of participation in the parenting program were fairly consistent across the research period. Although play remained an important feature of participation for these children, no significant improvement in the quality of their peer interactions was found during program participation. This finding was reinforced by the relative absence of themes in the children's interviews that related to friendship networks, social interactions, and relationships (e.g., friendships or playing with friends).

From the children's accounts, home and family life for parenting program children appeared to be quite different from that reported by children in the comparison groups. In contrast to children from the supported playgroup and preschool, parenting program children's responses contained no mention of love and affection as expressions of

connectedness in the parent-child dyad, no reports of shared meal times as opportunities to reconnect as a family or talk about the day's events, and no reference to learning activities (e.g., book reading) at home. However, change over time was found in one parenting program child's experiences of parent-child play indicating a potential improvement in the parent-child relationship. Change was also found in two children's experiences of having friends home to play suggesting potential improvements to social support networks for families during program involvement. There was also a trend towards positive change in narrative representations of caregiving within attachment relationships for parenting program children.

The implications of the findings for parenting programs are fourfold. First, the findings demonstrate that play opportunities are central to children's experiences of participation in a parenting program. However, staff members should focus on supporting children's social development and fostering relationships with other children in the program context. Second, the findings demonstrate that children perceive change within their home environment during participation in a parenting program, and that these changes are meaningful in terms of the aims and outcomes of programs designed to support families. Third, the findings suggest that attachment theory-informed parenting programs may have the potential to effect positive change in children's representations of their attachment relationships. Fourth, the findings demonstrate that young children's own experiences can inform and support programs designed to benefit children.

Lastly, this study demonstrates that through the use of a range of flexible data collection methods and prolonged engagement, young disadvantaged children can, and should, be included in research about issues that directly affect their lives.

## **STATEMENT OF CANDIDATE**

I certify that the research in this thesis entitled “Small voices, significant stakeholders: Young children’s experiences of program participation and family life during involvement in a parenting program” is my original work and it has not been previously submitted as part of the requirements for a degree to any university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. All the help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information resources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. The research presented in this thesis was approved by the Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee, reference no. 5201100804 on the 17<sup>th</sup> November 2011.

.....  
Kelly Baird (Student No. 41935721)

Date



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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The study reported in this thesis explored vulnerable young children's experiences of program participation and perceptions of change within their families during involvement in an intensive, attachment-based parenting program.<sup>1, 2</sup> This chapter provides the background to and the rationale for this study in relation to the role of parenting programs in supporting vulnerable young children. Further, the importance of including children's views in research about parenting programs is discussed.

#### **Background to the Study**

##### **The Role of Parenting Programs in Supporting Vulnerable Young Children**

Our understanding of the importance of early childhood on later life outcomes has improved considerably in the last 15 years. Developmental neurobiology has advanced our knowledge of brain development and how experiences in early childhood can shape and impact on children's future development, health, learning, and wellbeing (Hertzman & Williams, 2009; McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Early relationships also play a critical role in influencing a child's development. The quality, security, and responsiveness of relationships between parents<sup>3</sup> and children can affect a child's developmental trajectory (for better or worse) throughout the lifespan (Stronach, Toth, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2013). Further, the presence of both risk and protective factors (discussed in more detail in Chapter 2), and the interplay between these within a child's environment in early childhood and beyond can impact on their development (Mackay, 2003; Olesen, Macdonald, Raphael, & Butterworth, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> In the literature, the term 'parenting program' is often used interchangeably with the terms 'parent education', 'parent training', 'parent intervention program', and 'parent support'. The term 'parenting program' is used in the same comprehensive way in this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> For confidentiality reasons, the formal name of the parenting program (and any of the early childhood intervention programs) is not included in this thesis. Rather, the programs are referred to in generic terms (e.g., parenting program, supported playgroup, and preschool) throughout this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, 'parent' is used as a generic term to refer to a child's primary caregiver, generally their mother.

These understandings have led to a greater focus on government investment in the early years both in Australia and internationally. For example, in 2009, the Council for Australian Governments implemented the Investing in the Early Years strategy. This strategy aims to ensure that by 2020 “all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation” (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2009, p. 4).

Such strategies highlight the benefits of early childhood interventions on life outcomes for vulnerable or disadvantaged young children. Strong research evidence supports the argument that early childhood interventions, particularly those that work directly with both parents and children, play an important role in improving developmental outcomes for vulnerable children (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Farrington & Welsh, 2003; Heckman, 2008; Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005; Moran, Ghate, & van der Merwe, 2004; Schweinhart et al., 2005; Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). These early childhood interventions include intensive services (e.g., parenting programs for vulnerable children and their parents), targeted services (e.g., supported playgroups offered in communities considered more ‘at risk’ than the general population), and universal services (e.g., early childhood education and care services, such as preschools, considered accessible to all).

As mentioned above, the quality of a child’s earliest relationships (specifically the parent-child relationship) has a significant impact on a child’s development and later functioning (e.g., Bureau, Easterbrooks, & Lyons-Ruth, 2009; George, Cummings, & Davies, 2010). It is through these early relationships with their parents that children develop a secure attachment based on reciprocity, responsiveness, and warmth (Bernard et al., 2012; Moss et al., 2011). Problems associated more often (but not inevitably or exclusively) with disadvantage such as poverty, substance abuse, parental mental health issues, child abuse and neglect, and family violence or conflict can prevent or impair a child’s ability to form a secure attachment with their parent (Lee, Griffiths, Glossop, & Eapen, 2010). Parenting programs, as



an early childhood intervention, are one way of supporting positive outcomes for vulnerable or disadvantaged children by improving and supporting positive parent-child relationships and interactions (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

While many different parenting programs exist, the majority of programs have in common the explicit aim to improve outcomes for families and children by supporting the development of positive parent-child relationships, effective and appropriate parenting skills, family social support, parental problem solving skills, and secure and stable family relationships (Barlow, Johnston, Kendrick, Polnay, & Stewart-Brown, 2006; Moran et al., 2004). Parenting programs may also aim to strengthen individual, family and community functioning and well-being, and enhance and promote educational and health outcomes (Lundahl, Nimer, & Parsons, 2006; MacLeod & Nelson, 2000; Sanders, 2008).

Research evidence suggests that parenting programs may prevent or ameliorate negative outcomes and enhance positive outcomes for vulnerable children and their families. However, Moran, Ghate, and van der Merwe (2004) argue that the views of children are missing in research on parenting programs. Not all parenting programs work directly with children, but young children do attend some programs (such as the one reported on in this thesis) with their parents. Even so, research about parenting programs is most often based on understanding parents' or program staffs' views on child and family change. It rarely focuses on the children's views and little is understood about how children experience these programs or their perceptions of changes that may occur in their families. Children are key stakeholders in parenting programs and it is important that their views are included in this field of research.

### **The Importance of Including Children's Views in Research**

Since the late 1980s, there has been an increasing interest in hearing children's voices in research (McAuley & Brattman, 2002; Moss, Clark, & Kjørholt, 2005). This interest is

based on the idea that what children have to say is important and should be acknowledged. It is understood that children's experiences and viewpoints are often different from those of the adults who are frequently called upon to represent the views of children or to decide what is in their best interests (O'Kane, 2008). The need to respect the views of children and their right to have their say when decisions that affect them are being made has also been enshrined in the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989).

Early childhood researchers recognise the importance of children as “the primary source of knowledge about their own views and experiences” (Alderson, 2008, p. 287). Darbyshire, Schiller, and MacDougall (2005b) have argued “it is simply no longer good enough to dismiss the possibility of actively involving children in research because they are too young, ‘too silly’, too vulnerable, or just developmentally incapable of offering a view or describing and explaining their lives” (p. 468). Furthermore, *General Comment 7* of the *Convention* (United Nations, 2005) encourages “recognition of young children as social actors from the beginning of life...” (Section 2c) and identifies the need for young children to be viewed as “active members of families, communities and societies with their own concerns, interests and points of view” (Section 3.5).

The inclusion of children's voices is fundamental in early childhood research because of the obvious impact of early childhood services on children (Farrell, Tayler, & Tennent, 2002a). Several writers have made an eloquent case for this inclusion of children's perspectives. Dockett and Perry (2003) emphasised that adults can be informed about implications or outcomes for children when children are included in discussions about their lived experiences. Cook-Slather (2002) argued that involving children in educational research captured the neglected perspectives of those who actually experience first-hand on a day-to-day basis the effects of educational policies and practices. Woodhead and Faulkner (2000) suggested that “significant knowledge gains result when children's active participation in the

research is deliberately solicited and when their perspectives, views and feelings are accepted as genuine, valid evidence” (p. 31). Thorpe et al. (2004) acknowledged that first-hand accounts of children’s experiences should not be thought of as simply interesting or cute, but as credible and valid evidence that can then be used to strengthen and progress current knowledge of children’s everyday practices, and inform future policy and research directions. A similar argument was made by Farrell, Tayler, Tennent, and Gahan (2002b) in Australian research on children’s accounts of their experiences in early childhood services.

Even so, children who are considered vulnerable, at risk, disadvantaged or hard to reach (for example, children living in out of home care, children living with violence or drug use, or children who are Indigenous or culturally and linguistically diverse) are often further distanced from the opportunity to participate or make their voices heard (Clark & Statham, 2005; Vicary, Clare, Tennant, & Hault, 2009). In Ridge’s (2002) work on childhood poverty and social exclusion, she argued that while public policy was increasingly more family-focused, there needed to be a greater acknowledgement of the lived experiences of vulnerable children and an understanding and informed awareness of the issues that concerned them.

Most research focused on young children’s perspectives has investigated their experiences of early childhood services, such as child care centres and preschools (Cremin & Slatter, 2004; Einarsdottir, 2005a; Farrell et al., 2002a; Farrell et al., 2002b; Merewether & Fleet, 2014; Smith, Duncan, & Marshall, 2005; Stephenson, 2009) as well as children’s transitions to formal schooling (Dockett & Perry, 2003, 2005; MacDonald, 2009; Peters, 2003; Potter & Briggs, 2003; Yeo & Clarke, 2005). It is important to understand how children experience engagement and participation in other settings such as parenting programs. In addition, young children’s perspectives of their home and family life are rarely sought, with the majority of this research involving older, school-aged children (for example Dobbs, Smith, & Taylor, 2006; Goodnow & Burns, 1985; Morrow, 1998; Outley & Floyd, 2002;

Prout, 2002; Ridge, 2002; Skattebol et al., 2013; Skattebol, Saunders, Redmond, Bedford, & Cass, 2012).

Research that has examined the everyday lives of preschool and early school-aged children across different contexts (e.g., home and educational settings) has been conducted in Denmark (Hedegaard, 2009; Kousholt, 2011; Langsted, 1994), Finland (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Maatta, 2012), and Australia (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010). Taking this into consideration, exploring children's experiences across contexts (i.e., participation in a parenting program and everyday home and family life) can add considerably to our understanding of how a parenting program may influence practices within the home environment over time, as perceived by children who attend these programs with their mothers.

### **The Current Study**

The aim of the research reported in this thesis was to address these gaps in the literature. Adopting a longitudinal, mixed method design within a bioecological framework, the current project focused on the experiences of vulnerable young children when they were involved with their mothers in an intensive parenting program. The aim of the project was to understand how young children experienced the parenting program as well as to capture their perspectives of change within their families during program involvement. Young children who attended either a supported playgroup or preschool were included in the research as comparison groups. This provided opportunities to compare and contrast the experiences of parenting program children to those children who participated in other early childhood settings. The design supported a rich and multi-layered exploration of children's experiences of participation and everyday home and family life during involvement in a parenting program.

## **Structure of the Thesis**

Following this introduction to the study, a comprehensive review of the relevant literature focusing on parenting program research and young children's experiences of early childhood services and everyday home life is presented in Chapter 2. The chapter argues for the significance of the current research by highlighting gaps in the research literature. The theoretical framework (bioecological theory) that guided the current study is discussed in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4 the research design and methods are presented. This chapter begins with a literature review of ways to include children's voices in research before providing a detailed explanation of the study's methodology, including ethical considerations.

Results are presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Chapter 5 examines the children's experiences of program participation. Children's accounts of home and family life, and any perceived changes within their families during program involvement are explored in Chapter 6. Results pertaining to children's narrative attachment representations and any changes to these over time are presented in Chapter 7.

Personal reflections on the research process, including children's engagement with the research are presented in Chapter 8. Findings in relation to relevant literature are discussed in the final chapter, Chapter 9. Implications for policy, practice, research methodology as well as further directions for research are also presented in Chapter 9.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Children living in vulnerable or disadvantaged families are more likely than other children to experience adverse events and negative outcomes during their lives (Olesen et al., 2010; Shonkoff et al., 2012a). The importance of interventions in early childhood is well understood, and the ability of early interventions to improve outcomes for children has received much research attention (Heckman, Pinto, & Savelyev, 2013; Waldfogel et al., 2010). Interventions include parenting programs, supported playgroups, and early childhood education and care programs. While research has focused on children's experiences of early childhood settings, such as child care centres or preschools, little is known about how they experience other early childhood interventions, such as parenting programs. In addition, the voices of vulnerable young children are often not included in the research literature. This chapter reviews the relevant research literature and argues for the need to address the gaps in what is known about children's experiences of program participation and how children perceive changes in their families during involvement in a parenting program.

#### **Vulnerable Young Children and the Importance of Early Childhood Interventions**

An understanding of why and how young children and their parents become involved in early intervention services, such as parenting programs, is needed to provide the context for the current research. Literature on outcomes for young children in relation to the risk and protective factors associated with vulnerable families is examined first followed by research on effective early intervention programs.

#### **Risk and Protective Factors**

Over the past several decades, research has examined the life outcomes of children in relation to the risk and protective factors present in their lives. Shonkoff, Richter, van der Gaag, and Bhutta (2012b) consider a child's life outcomes to be "influenced by a dynamic

interplay between the cumulative burden of risk factors and the buffering effects of protective factors that can be identified within the individual, family, community, and broader socioeconomic and cultural contexts” (p. 467). Risk factors found to be associated with vulnerable families and negative outcomes for children include individual characteristics (e.g., early learning difficulties and difficult child temperament), family characteristics (e.g., parental substance abuse, adolescent parenting, parental psychopathology, and exposure to violence), and factors within the social context (e.g., social isolation and socioeconomic disadvantage) (Carbone, Fraser, Ramburuth, Nelms, & Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2004; Osofsky & Thompson, 2000; Shonkoff et al., 2012b).

Research evidence demonstrates that the effect of risk factors on child development is cumulative. That is, the more risk factors present in a child’s life, the greater the chance of poor developmental outcomes (Edwards, Baxter, Smart, Sanson, & Hayes, 2009; Hanewald, 2011; Olesen et al., 2010; Sameroff, Seifer, Barocas, Zax, & Greenspan, 1987; Taylor, 2006; Vinson, 2009). The importance of focusing policies and practices on addressing multiple and cumulative risk factors in a child’s life rather than on a single or specific risk factor was further argued by Fergusson and Horwood (2003):

What distinguishes the high risk child from other children is not so much exposure to a specific risk factor but rather life history that is characterised by multiple familial disadvantages that span social and economic disadvantages; impaired parenting; neglectful and abusive home environment; marital conflict; family instability; family violence; and high exposure to adverse family life events (p. 130).

While it is clear that a strong relationship exists between cumulative adverse factors/circumstances and developmental outcomes, this is not to say that the presence of these factors automatically results in negative outcomes (Fergusson & Horwood, 2003).

Protective factors can “interact with risk to change the predictive relationship between risk factors and negative outcomes” (Mackay, 2003, p. 99) thus reducing the probability of poor developmental outcomes for children.

As with risk factors, protective factors can be present in child characteristics (e.g., social competence, problem-solving skills, and easy temperament), family characteristics (e.g., optimal and adaptive parenting, family cohesion and functioning), as well as community factors (e.g., supportive social networks and access to support services) (Fergusson & Horwood, 2003; Mackay, 2003; Osofsky & Thompson, 2000). Of particular importance to outcomes for children, even when faced with adversity, is the protective nature and influence of reciprocity in early relationships and interactions between a child and their parent (e.g., parent-child attachment), and the importance of stable, nurturing, and responsive caregiving within this dyad (Hanewald, 2011; Osofsky & Thompson, 2000; Shonkoff et al., 2012b).

### **The Importance of Early Intervention**

As stated in Chapter 1, early life experiences play an important role in shaping a child’s developmental and life outcomes. Strong research evidence demonstrates the relationship between a child’s early environments and later life outcomes. That is, better developmental outcomes occur for young children who experience early environments that provide positive stimulation and sensitive, responsive caregiving from a familiar adult (generally a parent) (Heckman, 2013; Shonkoff et al., 2012a; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This understanding has been strengthened through developmental neuroscience research with its growing evidence on the impact of a child’s early experiences on brain development (Shonkoff et al., 2012b). These experiences lay the foundation for outcomes in childhood and beyond, affecting a person’s learning (e.g., linguistic, cognitive, and socioemotional skills), health (e.g., physical and mental), and behaviour (Shonkoff et al., 2012a).



Research has shown that children who have been exposed to chronic negative and traumatic experiences, including domestic violence or other abusive situations during early childhood, are more likely to have adverse emotional, behavioural, academic, social and physical outcomes later in life (Barlow et al., 2006; Herrenkohl, Hong, Klika, Herronkohl, & Russo, 2013; Lundahl et al., 2006). Children raised in abusive and dysfunctional family environments are more likely to have mental health issues such as antisocial and violent behaviour or depression and anxiety (Olds, Sadler, & Kitzman, 2007; Stephen, 2012). Children's behaviour, cognitive development, and school achievement are particularly affected by poor environmental circumstances, such as poverty (Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Schoon, Jones, Cheng, & Maughan, 2012). Further, many serious problems in adulthood (e.g., depression, substance abuse, family violence, chronic unemployment, and criminality) stem from negative or adverse experiences in early childhood (Bayer et al., 2009).

The potential for negative developmental trajectories due to adverse early life experiences supports the need for early intervention. Intervening early in vulnerable children's lives has the potential to significantly enhance later life outcomes. In the short-term, early childhood intervention programs have been shown to improve a child's cognitive and non-cognitive (e.g., socioemotional skills) outcomes (Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Heckman, 2013). Early childhood intervention programs are also able to potentially reduce the achievement gap between disadvantaged and more advantaged children, so these children can enter formal schooling on a more equal footing with same-aged peers (Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Longitudinal research in this area has found substantial positive long-term effects of early intervention (particularly interventions that work directly with parent and child and include an educational component) including higher rates of educational progression and attainment, higher employment rates, and reduced criminal activity and welfare dependence (Heckman, 2008; Heckman et al., 2013; Schweinhart et al., 2005).

In recent years, early intervention has garnered support from governments both in Australia and overseas. Intended outcomes of early childhood interventions include improvements in: parent-child relationships; parenting skills and social support for parents; cognitive, language, social and academic outcomes for children; and broader community conditions that impact on a child's wellbeing and parental functioning (Wise, de Silva, Webster, & Sanson, 2005). In the Australian context, interventions that occur in early childhood span a range of intensive, targeted and universal programs (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2009). The next section will examine research on parenting programs, and their impact on children's outcomes.

### **Parenting Programs**

A child's early relationships are fundamental to their development. These early relationships are usually formed between parent and child but can be formed with other primary caregivers such as grandparents. Parents are argued to have the most influence on a child's early experiences, and poor quality relationships and interactions with the child can increase the risk of children developing behavioural, emotional, and developmental problems (de Graaf, Speetjens, Smit, de Wolff, & Tavecchio, 2008). Parenting programs are one way of influencing and altering child outcomes by improving parental competencies and the parent-child relationship (Wade, Macvean, Falkiner, Devine, & Mildon, 2012).

More specifically, research examining the impact of parenting programs on vulnerable and disadvantaged families, including those with child maltreatment histories, has found that these programs have the potential to achieve some of the following outcomes for parents and children:

- Enhanced parental sensitivity and responsiveness (King, Priddis, & Kane, 2014; Osofsky et al., 2007)

- Improved parenting through increased parent knowledge of infant and child development, increased skills to effectively address children's behaviour, reduced levels of parenting stress, and increased parent engagement in early literacy practices (Barlow & Stewart-Brown, 2001; Letarte, Normandeau, & Allard, 2010; Sanders, 2008)
- Improved family social support networks and reduced social isolation, as evidenced by increased contact with informal social support networks and increased use and knowledge of community support agencies (Valentine & Katz, 2007).
- Improved security of children's attachment (Moss et al., 2011; Stronach et al., 2013; Toth, Maughan, Todd Manly, Spagnola, & Cicchetti, 2002)
- Enhanced cognitive, language, and social development in children (Moran et al., 2004)
- Reduced likelihood of children developing mental health or behavioural problems such as oppositional defiance or anxiety (Craig, 2004; Hiscock et al., 2008; Klein Velderman et al., 2006)

While parenting programs can improve parents' knowledge, skills, and support networks, research remains inconclusive as to whether or not participation in parenting programs prevents or reduces the potential for child maltreatment. Lundahl and colleagues (2006), and MacLeod and Nelson (2000) conducted meta-analyses and independently concluded that programs, particularly those including home visitation or intensive family preservation components as well as a mixture of group and individual delivery, were effective in reducing the risk that a parent will abuse or neglect their child. They also found that such

programs facilitated significant and meaningful change in parental attitudes towards abuse and child-rearing, as well as improved parental sense of emotional well-being and parenting skills. However Lundahl et al. (2006) reported that changes, particularly in parental behaviours and emotional well-being, were not sustained long-term, and MacLeod and Nelson (2000) reported that reactive interventions (interventions for families in which maltreatment has already occurred) had larger effect sizes immediately post intervention than at any later date.

Barlow et al.'s (2006) review of individual and group-based parenting programs for the treatment of physical child abuse and neglect found insufficient evidence to support the efficacy of parenting programs to reduce these risks to children. They did find limited evidence, however, to suggest programs that incorporated additional components specifically aimed at addressing physically abusive parenting such as excessive parental anger, misattributions and poor parent-child interactions were more effective compared with programs that did not include these components (Barlow et al., 2006).

Effective parenting interventions must also address complex environmental factors, including the intergenerational transmission of poor parenting. Cashmore (cited in Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1998) argued “most parenting programs ... do not adequately address the ways parents develop a parenting style and the social and emotional context of parenting and family relationships” (p. 23). This view identifies the need for parenting programs to provide more than just education and training to ensure optimal life outcomes for children. Parents need also to be supported to confront what lies behind their current parenting behaviour, such as their own experiences of being parented (Lee et al., 2010; Toth et al., 2002).

## **Children's Outcomes Influenced by Parenting Programs**

Outcomes for children have also been the subject of parenting program research. Measuring child outcomes is often focused on developmental domains such as cognitive ability, behaviour, social and emotional development, communication and language development, health, growth and motor development, and psychopathology (Berry, Bridges, & Zaslow, 2004; Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Carta, Greenwood, Luze, Cline, & Kuntz, 2004; Moran et al., 2004; National Research Council, 2008; Wiggins, Fenichel, & Mann, 2007). Developmental outcomes for children are typically assessed using standardised developmental assessment measures.

There is some debate about the appropriateness of standardised developmental measures for highly vulnerable or disadvantaged children and families, particularly in relation to parent-completed measures. In studies involving vulnerable families (e.g., Grove & Robinson, 2008), it has been reported that some parents had difficulty completing the measures due to issues with level of literacy and length of questionnaire. Further, families involved with child protection services have been observed to often present an inaccurate or distorted view of child or parenting behaviour (Grove & Robinson, 2008; Lewis, 2001). This may occur because of parents' limited understanding of appropriate age-based child development or parenting skills, or because parents feel threatened or inadequate, or feel mistrust because of prior negative experiences with child protection services (Darlington, Healy, & Feeney, 2010).

However, standardised developmental measures also provide opportunities for direct assessment or observation by more objective researchers or professionals compared to parental reports. Further, standardised developmental measures can serve as an important tool for demonstrating a program's effectiveness in promoting and enhancing children's development (Lewis, 2001).

Comprehensive reviews and meta-analyses that have examined young children's outcomes have shown mixed results. Small but positive effects on children's cognitive, social and emotional outcomes have been found following participation in a parenting program (Layzer, Goodson, Bernstein, & Price, 2001; Moran et al., 2004). The largest effects for children's outcomes were found for programs that included an early childhood education component (Kreider, 2004; Layzer et al., 2001). This should be not surprising given the strength of the evidence for the positive effects of quality early childhood education programs on outcomes for vulnerable young children (Brooks-Gunn, 2003). It has also been suggested that even when improvements in parenting outcomes occurred (e.g., enhanced parenting attitudes and knowledge) they may not have been sufficient to translate into positive and significant outcomes for children (Goodson, 2008; Layzer et al., 2001).

Child and family change has also been explored through qualitative research on parenting programs. This body of research overwhelmingly explores the perspectives of parents only. For example, parents who completed a centre-based parenting program were asked to discuss improvements they saw in their children as well as in the overall family functioning (Barlow & Stewart-Brown, 2001). Parents reported increased empathetic understanding towards their children and improved ability to understand, identify and respond to their children's social and behavioural development, thus improving the parent-child relationship (Barlow & Stewart-Brown, 2001). In a more recent Australian study about an attachment-based parenting program for Aboriginal parents and their young children, mothers were asked to reflect on the parent-child relationship following program participation (Lee et al., 2010). Mothers reported improvements in interaction patterns and communication with their children which was seen as promoting a more positive parent-child relationship (Lee et al., 2010).

The underlying premise of parenting programs is that they will effect positive change for children. This suggests that positive changes to parenting and child and family

relationships will inevitably improve outcomes for children (de Graaf et al., 2008; Wade et al., 2012). However, this may not always be the case. For example, positive, direct flow-on effects to children's outcomes were not found in a recent study that examined changes to attachment-based caregiving in young children following parental participation in a social learning theory-based parenting program (O'Connor, Matias, Futh, Tantam, & Scott, 2013). Parents were the focus of this parenting program and children were not involved. While improvements to parental sensitivity were found, there was no evidence of positive change in children's attachment representations (O'Connor et al., 2013). One explanation from the authors was that children did not have any direct involvement in the program.

Young people's perceptions of changes in their relationship with their parents and changes to their own behaviour and attitudes were reported in an evaluation of the United Kingdom's Youth Justice Board's Parenting Program (Ghate & Ramella, 2002). Although parents reported positive improvements in their relationships with their children, only mild improvements were reported by the young people. Furthermore, very little change to the young people's behaviour or attitudes (via self-reports) was identified. Similar to the children in O'Connor et al.'s (2013) research, the young people were not involved in the parenting program. Ghate and Ramella (2002) suggested, "there was probably little scope for change at the level of the child" (p. 44) as a result of this program feature. Results such as those reported in this section suggest children's direct involvement in parenting programs may be needed for significant change to occur at the child level.

In their review of the international parenting support literature, Moran et al. (2004) argued for the importance of including children's self-reports along with parent/adult reports in parenting program research. Differences in how children, as opposed to their parents, view parenting programs and subsequent outcomes have not often been reported. These potentially divergent views have the potential to inform policy makers and practitioners about the

efficacy of parenting programs in supporting change at both the parent and child level. In addition, children's perspectives may contribute to the evidence that informs understanding the intensity and duration of parenting programs needed to bring about sufficient changes in parenting for children to notice a difference. Children are key stakeholders and ultimate beneficiaries of parenting programs and the inclusion of their views would add considerably to the literature.

### **Attachment Theory-Informed Parenting Programs**

As noted in the preceding section, better outcomes occur when parents and children are both involved in a parenting program. Parents and their young children attended the parenting program reported on in this thesis. This particular parenting program was also underpinned by attachment theory. The research evidence for attachment theory-informed parenting programs is examined in this section.

Parenting programs based on attachment theory often work with the parent-child dyad and aim to increase the responsiveness and sensitivity of a parent to their child. It is argued by attachment theorists that increased responsiveness and sensitivity enhances a child's sense of security, thus improving the quality of the parent-child relationship and interactions (Hoffman, Marvin, Cooper, & Powell, 2006; Stronach et al., 2013; Tully, 2009). In such parenting programs, parents are also supported to reflect on their own experiences of being parented, their internal representations of themselves in relation to others, and how these representations affect interactions with their own children. It is through this process that therapeutic change is believed to occur (Toth et al., 2002). Attachment theory-informed programs include Circle of Security (Hoffman et al., 2006) and child-parent psychotherapy (sometimes referred to as preschooler-parent psychotherapy) (Stronach et al., 2013; Toth et al., 2002). It also includes the parenting program at the centre of the current research.



Research with maltreated children and their parents has demonstrated the efficacy of attachment theory-informed programs in increasing awareness, sensitivity, and responsiveness of parent-child interactions, and enhancing child attachment (see Bernard et al., 2012; Hoffman et al., 2006; Lee et al., 2010; Moss et al., 2011; Osofsky et al., 2007; Toth et al., 2002). A recent randomised control trial of a child-parent psychotherapy program for maltreated children found sustained attachment security in the intervention group children 12 months after the end of the program (Stronach et al., 2013).

While much of the research on attachment-based parenting programs is completed with mother-infant dyads, and assesses attachment quality using the Ainsworth Strange Situation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) or the Macarthur Preschool Strange Situation (Cassidy & Marvin, 1992), Toth et al.'s (2002) research examined maltreated preschool children's attachment representations using a narrative story completion task. This research found that participation in an attachment theory-informed parenting program had greater efficacy in altering children's representations of self and of caregivers than participation in a didactic model of intervention (e.g., a psychoeducational and cognitive-based parenting program designed to improve parenting skills) (Toth et al., 2002). The research showed that children's maladaptive maternal representations and negative self-representations decreased significantly while positive self-representations and positive expectations of the mother-child relationship increased significantly over time during participation in child-parent psychotherapy.

Toth et al.'s (2002) research was particularly important as it is during the preschool years that, "representational models of self and of self in relation to other evolving from the attachment relationship become increasingly structured and organised ... [and] increasingly integrated into more generalised models of relationships over time, thereby affecting children's future relationship expectations" (p. 879). The findings from this study provided

further evidence that representational models of self and of self in relation to other continued to evolve during the preschool years. Further, the findings emphasised the potential malleability of these internal working models when young children were involved with their mothers in an attachment theory-informed parenting intervention (Toth et al., 2002). Positive changes to young children's representational models also have the potential to improve developmental trajectories, particularly the quality of relationships with peers and future partners (Toth et al., 2002).

In summary, the parent-child relationship plays a significant role in influencing young children's development. The importance for children experiencing nurturing, responsive, and sensitive early relationships has been well documented. Research has provided evidence that attachment theory-informed parenting programs have the potential to promote secure attachment relationships in infancy, and to alter preschool children's internal representational models in a positive direction. In the current study, children along with their mothers attended an intensive, long-term parenting program underpinned by attachment theory. The next section reviews the current evidence base for this particular parenting program.

### **Parenting Program in the Current Study**

The parenting program that is the focus of the current research originated from the United Kingdom and was implemented from 1998 by a large non-government organisation in highly disadvantaged suburbs of Sydney, Australia. The program was designed to build strong attachments between parents and children, and support positive parent-child interactions. The program aimed to “break the cyclical effect of destructive and negative family behaviour; prevent child abuse with a particular focus on emotional abuse and neglect; encourage self-help and lasting change; inspire good parenting and encourage the value of positive parent-child relationships; and raise the self-esteem of individual parents” (Mondy & Mondy, 2003, p. 28). Further, it aimed to provide a safe and stable environment for parents (many of whom

needed to develop their own secure attachments) and their children so they might begin to foster strong parent-child attachments (Mondy & Mondy, 2003; Pound, 1990). The program typically assisted parents (usually mothers with at least one child under five) who experienced difficulties in the parent-child relationship, were socially isolated, or faced potential or actual child protection issues (child abuse or neglect) (Mondy & Mondy, 2003). Parents and their children attended the centre-based program at least two four-hour days per week for between 12-24 months.

Research that has focused on this particular parenting program has found improved maternal self-esteem and confidence, and reduced problem behaviours and positive developmental gains for children (Mondy, 2001). Reductions in parental stress and potential for physical child abuse, and less rigidity in families' expectations and management of children have also been reported (Mondy & Mondy, 2008d). Anecdotal evidence has also supported the effectiveness of this program in helping mothers make positive changes to their own and their children's lives (Gurr & Hansen, 1997). However, caution is needed when considering these results. First, most of the research has been the result of internal evaluations conducted by the main organisation that has implemented this parenting program in Australia, rather than rigorous external studies. Second, the research has significant methodological limitations, such as limited use of objective, standardised measures to assess change in parents and children. Moreover, most of the program's 'evidence' base has relied on mothers' and staff members' anecdotal reports of change in parents' and children's lives. Third, much of the existing research on this parenting program has been contradictory or else results have not been supported in international studies.

Independent research on the parenting program has been conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia. Cox (1993) found significant improvements in maternal mental health for mothers who had been involved in the UK program for longer than six months, as

well as significant improvement in mothers' abilities to anticipate their children's needs. On the other hand, it was difficult to demonstrate evidence of change in mother-child relationships or beneficial effects of participation for children, even though these were intended outcomes of this program. Cox (1993) suggested this may have been due to an insufficient timeframe for change to occur during the evaluation (six months). Other research from the UK (based on a follow-up of 29 mothers one year after the original study) found that one in five mothers described improvements in child behaviour problems although one third of these mothers also reported a decline in their own emotional health (Oakley, Rajan, & Turner, 1998).

An Australian evaluation that used a mixed methods approach (interviews, standardised measures, and researcher observations) found demonstrable benefits in the program's four target areas (improved parent-child attachment, improved social connectedness for families, increased opportunities for children to reach their individual development milestones, and improved parenting styles and practices) (Grove & Robinson, 2008). Improvements over time in children's internalising and externalising behaviours were found based on mother-completed reports on the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL). However, the authors commented that in some situations mothers did not accurately report their child's development or behaviour (Grove & Robinson, 2008). It was suggested that this may be due to the mothers' idealised expectation of child behaviour and development (Grove & Robinson, 2008).

Further, mothers described changes in their relationships with their children (e.g., feeling more connected to them, and enjoying spending time with them), better knowledge of child development, improved parenting strategies, and increased social connectedness. Discrepancies existed, however, between results of the standardised measures (Parent Behaviour Checklist and Interpersonal Support Evaluation List) and mothers' interview

responses. While parents spoke about improvements in their own and their children's lives, results from the standardised measures found minimal change over a 12-month period. Grove and Robinson (2008) suggested that other factors (demographic factors of families, length and wording of standardised measures, and problems with administration of the measures) may have contributed to these discrepancies, and more weight should be given to results from other measures (e.g., interviews with mothers and staff, and researcher observations) that did indicate program effectiveness.

Other findings were mostly based on process evaluation. For example, researcher observations were completed during the daily parent interaction session (this session promotes mothers being responsible for their child at all times) to assess whether the program's strategy to promote positive parent-child attachment through this activity was implemented as intended. No assessment of attachment was completed, though mother and staff interview reports were considered to demonstrate positive change in the parent-child relationship. Similarly, it was reported that the program supported improvement in at least one developmental domain for children based on findings from interviews with mothers and researcher observations (Grove & Robinson, 2008). While the CBCL showed reductions in children's problem behaviour, no other formal assessment of child developmental outcomes was completed. Lastly, the authors noted that in previous unpublished research (see Neal, 2007) it was found that children attending this parenting program were more delayed in play than developmental skills. Nonetheless, changes to children's play abilities as an outcome of program participation were not assessed in the evaluation.

In summary, the literature mostly reports that parents and children benefit positively from being involved in this parenting program. However, issues with the research completed on this program undermine the evidence base (e.g., reliance on internal evaluations, anecdotal evidence, and mother- and staff-completed reports as well as lack of appropriate measures,

particularly in the Australian research). Further research is needed to determine program effectiveness for parents.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, further research is needed to understand children's experiences of participation as well as their perceptions of change in their families during involvement in this program. In addition, while the research suggests that the program enhances positive parent-child attachment and relationships, evidence is needed to support this claim.

The study described in this thesis focuses on vulnerable young children who attended an attachment-based parenting program with their mothers. The children who formed the comparison groups attended two other early childhood services, a supported playgroup or a preschool, both of which are considered early childhood interventions. Literature pertaining to these early childhood interventions will be reviewed in the following section.

### **Other Early Childhood Interventions**

Supported playgroups and preschools, as two other forms of early childhood interventions, are examined in this section.

#### **Supported Playgroups**

Supported playgroups are a two-generational or dual-focused model aimed at supporting the development and wellbeing of young children (0-5-years-old) and their parents. In the Australian context, supported playgroups are an early childhood intervention that targets vulnerable families, and are usually located in disadvantaged communities (Jackson, 2013). Supported playgroups are facilitated by professionals (e.g., early childhood teachers or community workers) and aim to: provide quality early childhood experiences to promote child development; increase parent knowledge (e.g., child development and early childhood learning); facilitate social networks and support; provide access to information and

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<sup>4</sup> The current study is embedded in a larger research project that is rigorously examining program effectiveness of this particular parenting program.

resources; and provide opportunities for identification of child developmental problems and referral to appropriate services (ARTD Consultants, 2008; Greal et al., 2012; Jackson, 2011). It is expected that through participation in supported playgroups, parents will observe the modelling of age-appropriate play experiences (designed to be easily replicable in the home environment), and appropriate parenting strategies to enhance their own confidence, skills, and capacity as a parent (Greal et al., 2012).

In a review of playgroup literature (mostly based on research from the United Kingdom), Dadich and Spooner (2008) pointed to several potential benefits for children and parents who attend playgroups including enhanced cognitive, language, social, emotional, and behavioural development through age-appropriate stimulation and peer contact; positive parent-child relationships; increased parental confidence; improved parenting skills; and extended social support networks.

In a recent evaluation of supported playgroups in Victoria (Australia), Greal et al. (2012) found that participation had a positive effect on parents' social supports and networks, and facilitated improvements in parents' confidence and skills. Further, parents reported that participation had a positive effect on the parent-child relationship (e.g., provided better ways of interacting with their children and increased enjoyment of children). However, data based on standardised measures found no significant change in the parent-child relationship during participation in a supported playgroup (Greal et al., 2012). Lastly, parents also described benefits of participation in relation to children's socialisation (e.g., children learnt to socialise, interact with others, and form friendships), improvements in school readiness skills (e.g., improved attention span, and language and communication skills), and increased confidence (Greal et al., 2012). Similar findings in relation to parent's perspectives on the benefits of participation in Australian supported playgroups have been reported elsewhere (see ARTD Consultants, 2008; Jackson, 2009, 2011, 2013; Needham & Jackson, 2012).

What remains missing from this research is how children themselves experience these programs, and the changes they see within their families during participation. Jackson (2009) highlighted the absence of young children's voices as a limitation of her research on supported playgroups. In doing so, she acknowledged that the inclusion of children's voices would add considerably to our understandings of the supported playgroup model as an early childhood intervention.

## **Preschools**

In the Australian context, preschools or early childhood education and care programs are viewed as universal early childhood interventions. Preschools are viewed as having the potential to promote positive child development outcomes for all young children through enhancing protective factors and reducing risk factors (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2009). There is substantial longitudinal evidence from international research that emphasises the effectiveness of quality early childhood education and care programs in improving outcomes for young children, including vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

One of the most widely cited and well-known of these early intervention programs is the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program. This program provided a high-quality preschool enrichment program for young children living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the Ypsilanti school district of Michigan, USA. Weekly home visits were also conducted by the teachers to engage and involve parents in their children's learning and development. Longitudinal evaluation data from the High/Scope Perry Preschool research study has provided strong evidence that "high-quality preschool programs for young children living in poverty contribute to their intellectual and social development in childhood and their school success, economic performance, and reduced commission of crime in adulthood" (Schweinhart et al., 2005, p. 5).



Similar longitudinal research on the effectiveness of early childhood education has been conducted in the United Kingdom. The Effective Provision of Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) Project has investigated the development of more than 3,000 children from preschool to post-compulsory education. The study found that children who were from disadvantaged backgrounds benefited significantly from attending quality preschool or early childhood education programs, and that attendance at preschool could help ameliorate the effects of social disadvantage (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). Participation in preschool education had positive effects on children's intellectual and social behavioural development, and provided vulnerable and disadvantaged children with a better start to school (Sylva et al., 2004). The study also found that disadvantaged or vulnerable children benefited most when they attended preschools with children from a mixture of social backgrounds (Sylva et al., 2004).

Further, Melhuish (2004) completed a substantial review of the impact of early childhood education programs on vulnerable and disadvantaged children. He concluded that while attendance at a quality preschool or early childhood education program is of universal benefit to all children in relation to their educational and social development, it is particularly beneficial for vulnerable and disadvantaged children (Melhuish, 2004).

Thus far, this literature review has examined research about the importance of early childhood interventions (such as parenting programs, supported playgroups, and preschools) for vulnerable young children and their families. In the next section, research on young children's experiences of these programs will be examined.

### **Young Children's Experiences of Early Childhood Interventions**

This thesis argues for the importance of including children's voices in research about their experience of the environments in which they participate. As noted in Chapter 1, there

has been a considerable shift over the last 20 years in thinking about young children as valid and credible informants on their own lived experiences (Alderson, 2008; Brooker, 2011; Darbyshire et al., 2005b; Prout & James, 1997). Most research that has examined children's perceptions has focused on children who attend early childhood education and care programs (ECEC) (e.g., preschool/child care). This section begins with what is known about young children's experiences of ECEC programs before examining the limited literature on children's experiences of other early childhood interventions.

### **Young Children's Experiences of Early Childhood Education and Care Programs**

Studies on young children's experiences of ECEC programs have investigated a range of issues related to such programs. Researchers have examined children's perceptions of quality within their early learning centre (Coleyshaw, Whitmarsh, Jopling, & Hadfield, 2012; Dupree, Bertram, & Pascal, 2001, August; Einarsdottir, 2005b), and children's perceptions of participation, decision-making and opportunities available to exercise influence within their preschool setting (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). In other studies, children have been asked about their everyday experiences of attending an early childhood service including their perspectives on the routines, the activities, the premises, and the role of adults and children in the setting (Baird, 2013; Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2007; Clark, 2005b, 2007; Clark & Moss, 2009; Cremin & Slatter, 2004; Dahl & Aubrey, 2005; Daly et al., 2007; Einarsdottir, Dockett, & Perry, 2009; Farrell et al., 2002a; Grace & Bowes, 2009; Grace, Bowes, Trudgett, McFarlane, & Honig, 2011; Langsted, 1994; Stephenson, 2009).

Other studies of children's experiences of ECEC programs have investigated children's experiences of outside play and outside spaces (Clark & Moss, 2005; Merewether & Fleet, 2014); children's perspectives on their learning experiences (Carr, 2000; Smith et al., 2005); children's perspectives of culture and practice in preschools (Stephen & Brown, 2004); children's identity-maintenance in early childhood settings (Brooker, 2006); children's

citizenship, participation and inclusion in their early childhood settings (Melhuish, 2004); and children's perspectives on adult reactions to their behaviour within preschool settings (Formosinho & Araujo, 2004).

While not specifically focused on children aged five or younger, there is a growing body of research about children's experiences of the transition to primary school (Dockett & Perry, 2003, 2005; Einarsdottir et al., 2009; MacDonald, 2009; Peters, 2003; Potter & Briggs, 2003; Thorpe et al., 2004). This research has mostly been completed with children aged between four and six years old who attended kindergarten or grade one of primary school.

**Key themes.** Several key themes have emerged from the above-mentioned research. While not exhaustive, the following themes may be considered the prominent themes raised by young children: (1) The importance of friends and contact with other children; (2) Play and other activities; (3) The role of adults in ECEC programs; and (4) Decision making and autonomy.

*The importance of friends and contact with other children.* A consistent theme identified in research with young children in relation to their experiences of ECEC programs has been the importance of friends and other children. Children have often nominated their friends and playing with other children as the best aspects of their ECEC program (Baird, 2013; Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2007; Clark, McQuail, & Moss, 2003; Clark & Moss, 2009; see Cremin & Slatter, 2004; Dahl & Aubrey, 2005; Grace & Bowes, 2009; Grace et al., 2011; Langsted, 1994). Einarsdottir (2005b) found that children identified friends and other children as aspects of their ECEC program they would miss if they left. Although friends were often considered the most important factor, other research has found that the adverse behaviour of other children was seen as a negative aspect of attending an ECEC program (e.g., Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2007; Dahl & Aubrey, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2005b; Grace & Bowes, 2009;

Grace et al., 2011; Kragh-Muller & Isbell, 2011; Langsted, 1994). Children reported they did not enjoy contact with some other children due to teasing, being hurt, or feeling rejected. However, in general children's social relationships within ECEC programs can be considered one of the most important and salient factors for young children in relation to their experiences of participation.

***Play and other activities.*** Play and playing have also been identified consistently in studies of children's views of early childhood services. In Dupree et al.'s (2001, August) research, children identified activities such as creative activities, imaginary play, and messy play (e.g., play involving water, sand and play dough) as the activities they liked doing most at their ECEC program. In other research, children identified various activities or play equipment as what they liked best (Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2007; Clark & Statham, 2005; Dahl & Aubrey, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2005b; Farrell et al., 2002a; Grace et al., 2011; Langsted, 1994). In relation to play, children have specified particular areas or spaces within their ECEC program. In many studies, children have mentioned the outdoor play area as being important, both as a favourite area to play (Dahl & Aubrey, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2005b; Grace et al., 2011; Kragh-Muller & Isbell, 2011; Merewether & Fleet, 2014; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001) and as providing the option to move freely between inside and outside play environments (Clark & Moss, 2005).

***The role of adults.*** In Clark and Moss' (2009) research, children identified adults as people who helped them or played with them. In the same research, children felt adults played an important role in maintaining order, as well as providing comfort, safety, and security (Clark & Moss, 2009). Children's emphasis on strong connections to particular individual adults was highlighted in Grace et al.'s (2011) research, and children identified adults' roles in relation to emotional or personal needs (e.g., caring and helping). Similarly Kragh-Muller

and Isbell (2011) reported children's liking of kind, caring adults in their ECEC program who also helped resolve conflict between children.

Children have also expressed negative views on the role of adults in ECEC programs, particularly regarding the way power had been exercised over them. Cousins (1999) and Dupree et al. (2001, August) found children did not appreciate feeling hurried or not being allowed to complete a task or activity. Further, Grace et al. (2011) reported that some children appeared to have no connection to an adult and were at times frightened by their teachers, and Kragh-Muller and Isbell (2011) reported that children did not like particular discipline strategies used by their ECEC teachers (e.g., being scolded or yelled at).

***Decision making and autonomy.*** Most research on children's decision making and autonomy has reported on children's participation in decision making within ECEC programs. Children have often reported that they were free to decide what they played, who they played with and, in some cases, where they played (e.g., inside or outside) (Dahl & Aubrey, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2005b; Kragh-Muller & Isbell, 2011; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). However, children were aware that these decisions were still subject to certain limitations such as the availability of resources or activities only at particular times, and that teachers' decisions generally override children's in cases of confrontation or disagreements between teachers and children (Einarsdottir, 2005b). Research has suggested that ultimately, children were aware that adults have more decision-making power and control than children, and children have reported that they generally have little influence over the organisation, routines and rules at their early childhood service (Einarsdottir, 2005b; Langsted, 1994; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001).

## **Young Children's Experiences of Other Early Childhood Interventions**

Compared with research about young children's experiences of ECEC programs, little research has been undertaken with children about their experiences of other early childhood interventions. However, in recognition of children's rights and the shift in thinking about children's voice and participation, there has been an increasing interest in exploring children's views as service users. This research has focused mainly on school-aged children rather than children aged five years and under. Clark and Statham (2005) argued that this may be due largely to an uncertainty by researchers about 'how to listen' to younger children.

Studies have focused on school-aged children's and adolescents' experiences of services offered to them or their families, their contact with professionals, such as social workers, and the extent of their own participation in decisions on issues that affect their lives. Much of this research has been undertaken in the United Kingdom in response to the emphasis in government policy on 'integrated working' and personalised services for children and adolescents in care or considered 'in need' (Kellett, 2011; Oliver, 2010). These studies have generally involved vulnerable children living with their families who have had contact with social workers or school psychology services, or children living in foster care placements or residential care or who have left care (Aubrey & Dahl, 2006; Bond, 1995; Heptinstall, Bhopal, & Brannen, 2001; Ofsted, 2009, 2013; Oliver, 2010; Roger, 2007; Sinclair, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2001; Timms & Thoburn, 2003). In general, these studies found children and adolescents wanted to exercise more power and decision making over issues that affected their lives, such as choice of placement or care plan when in child protection services (Aubrey & Dahl, 2006; Oliver, 2010).

**Young children's experiences of playgroups.** An Australian study of young children's experiences of child and family services<sup>5</sup> included 3-year-old children attending a playgroup along with their parents (Farrell et al., 2002a; Farrell et al., 2002b). This study was part of a larger research project designed to build an evidence base for effective integration of child and family services. Similar to young children's perspectives of ECEC programs, playgroup children enjoyed the different toys and activities that were available at the program, and did not like the negative or adverse behaviour of other children (Farrell et al., 2002a; Farrell et al., 2002b). When compared to the other children (aged 3- to 8-years-old) in this study, playgroup children (who were the youngest group at 3-years-old) focused more on favourite toys or activities than friendships and other children when asked about their experiences (Farrell et al., 2002b). This finding may be related to children's social development as it could be expected that older children would be more likely to engage in cooperative play and to form relationships with peers (Ladd, Herald, & Andrews, 2006). Further, relationships may be more important for preschool children who spend considerable time together each day compared to children who may attend a playgroup for only a few hours each week.

The authors noted a "lack of or limited reference by the children to adults (both caregivers and parents) in the various settings" (Farrell et al., 2002a, p. 16). The absence of children's views on adults may have been because in this particular study they were not asked specifically about the role of adults (unlike in research on children's perceptions of their ECEC programs). While this research included young children's experiences of participation in a playgroup, whether these children were part of families considered vulnerable or

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<sup>5</sup> In this study, child and family services included a state preschool and primary school (state government-funded), child care centres (joint federal- and state government-funded), community kindergarten (joint state government- and community-funded), and a playgroup (community-funded parent and child group).

disadvantaged is not known as the study did not report on the demographics of the children or their families.

**Young children's experiences of parenting programs.** Research has rarely explored young children's experiences of parenting programs, so it was not surprising that Moran et al. (2004) argued that what still remains missing in research on parenting programs are the views of children. However, a small study ( $N = 8$ ) based on the parenting program in the current research aimed to explore preschool-aged children's experiences of program participation (Mondy, 2001; Mondy & Mondy, 2008c). Findings from the study suggested that the children interviewed were generally happy about attending the parenting program. Children reported that they liked playing with friends and favourite toys as well as spending time with staff members (Mondy & Mondy, 2008c).

While the study described above attempted to understand the perspectives and feelings of a group of young children attending a parenting program with their mothers, it contained several limitations. For example, the Play Facilitator (a staff member who worked directly with children from the program) interviewed children during the study while the researcher remained a passive observer. Mondy and Mondy (2008c) point out that it was felt that the children would be more likely to share their experiences with a familiar person. However, it could be argued that the children may not have felt comfortable sharing personal and possibly negative experiences of the program with the adult worker with whom they had the most contact at the program, thus affecting their responses. Children's views on program participation were elicited through the use of 12 picture prompts (cards with bears displaying different emotions). While most children responded to this activity, it also limited the responses given to the emotions presented by the picture prompts. While the Play Facilitator drew pictures for some children (e.g., at times children lost interest with the bear cards so the Play Facilitator drew faces depicting emotions), no child-led data collection activities (e.g.,



child-led photography or drawing) were used as a way to gather children's perceptions of program participation. The inclusion of these activities may have provided children with greater control over the research process as well as another opportunity to share their experiences.

While one aim of this thesis is to understand children's experiences of a parenting program, it also explores children's views of home and family life as a way of capturing their perceptions of family change during program involvement. The following section examines research focused on children's experiences of home life.

### **Children's Experiences of Home and Family Life**

It is widely accepted in the literature that the family exerts considerable influence on a child's development, yet research about children's experiences of the home and family context has been completed mostly with school-aged children and adolescents. For example, studies have investigated the experiences of school-aged children living with domestic violence (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007); the everyday fears of older children in the southern border area of Thailand (UNICEF, 2008); children's experiences of family discipline (Dobbs et al., 2006); children's perspectives and beliefs on the concept of family (Morrow, 1998); children's views on home and school (Goodnow & Burns, 1985); children's perspectives on wellbeing (Skattebol et al., 2013); children's views on the influence of parenting strategies on leisure experiences (Outley & Floyd, 2002); and children's and young people's experiences of living in low-income families or economic adversity (Andresen & Fegter, 2011; Ridge, 2002; Skattebol et al., 2012).

Research on young children's experiences of home and family life has been conducted in Finland (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Maatta, 2012), Denmark (Kousholt, 2011; Langsted, 1994), and Australia (Baird, 2013; Fler & Hedegaard, 2010). The research conducted by

Baird (2013) formed the pilot study to the current research. A small group of young children who attended a child care centre in a disadvantaged suburb of Western Sydney were asked about the activities or routines that made up their everyday home and family life. It was found that even young children were capable of providing meaningful reflections on their own lived experiences within the home context (e.g., children spoke about activities they did with their families such as riding bicycles together). The pilot study also highlighted the fact that children perceived significant changes over time in these everyday routines of family life (e.g., one young girl spoke about her grandmother helping her get dressed in the morning, and that she used to sleep at her grandmother's but did not do so anymore) (Baird, 2013).

Kyronlampi-Kylmanen and Maata's (2012) research with 5- to 7-year olds in Finland found that their relationship with their parents at home was of great importance to the children and that home was perceived as a "place of joy and togetherness" (p. 75). Children emphasised being together with their parents and siblings (e.g., playing or relaxing together as well as affection and physical closeness) as significant to their experiences of home (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Maatta, 2012). Feeling connected to and loved by parents has also been reported in qualitative research on older children's views of home and family life (Andresen & Fegter, 2011; Goodnow & Burns, 1985; James, 1999; Morrow, 1998; Skattebol et al., 2013).

The other research mentioned above examined young children's experiences across two contexts – their home and ECEC program – and often compared and contrasted their experiences in the settings. For example, Langsted's (1994) seminal research explored 'ordinary' young children's experiences of family life with their experiences of their ECEC program in Denmark through the use of interviews and a 'sightseeing trip' (children physically walked the interviewer around their home while talking about their daily routines). Langsted (1994) noted that while children spoke easily and openly about their experiences of

their ECEC program, it was more difficult to engage children in talking about their families and home life. It was suggested this was due to family being taken for granted by children and emphasised that “family *is* quality and all other contexts are judged in relation to the family” (Langsted, 1994, p. 37). Examples of children’s loyalty to parents (even in cases of abuse and neglect) were provided in this research as evidence for this interpretation. No further detail was offered nor any explanation given as to how the researchers determined that children considered family as the quality standard.<sup>6</sup> Further, as the research was designed to capture the experiences of daily life for ‘ordinary’ children living in Nordic countries, the voices of the most vulnerable children were excluded.

Kousholt’s (2011) study in Denmark and Fler and Hedegaard’s (2010) study in Australia examined children’s participation in their everyday lives across two contexts: home and child care or school. Their research explored the affordances provided for children’s development in each context, and how one context could shape and influence the other. These studies explored how parents’ and teachers’ understandings of children’s development was influenced by children’s experiences in different contexts (e.g., parents’ views of their child at home were influenced by understandings of how their child behaved or interacted with others in the child care/school environment), and were not specifically focused on children’s own understandings or experiences of these settings. Of importance to the study reported in this thesis, this type of research demonstrated how one context may influence another context in which children participate.

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<sup>6</sup> Christensen, James and Jenks (1999) provided a similar interpretation when in their study, older children struggled to articulate what quality time with their family represented. Christensen et al. (1999) suggested that “family time at home simply *is*” (p. 146), and that some children did not perceive quality time with their family being anything but ordinary and non-eventful. Similarly, James (1999) implied that for children, parents and families may simply be so fundamental to their lives and taken-for-granted that to reflect and talk about family and home life was unnecessary. However, James (1999) questioned whether children actively excluded or filtered information they were willing to share about their families and parents. This offers another possible explanation for the difficulty Langsted (1994) had in engaging children in discussions about their families and home life.

While their study was not directly focused on children's experiences of everyday home life, Nutbrown and Hannon's (2004) study in the UK investigated socially and economically disadvantaged 5-year-old children's perspectives on family literacy. Children whose parents participated in a family literacy program reported a modest and consistent increase in family literacy activity. Nutbrown and Hannon (2004) concluded that this demonstrated young children's ability to perceive and report on changes in the practices of their family (in this case literacy activities) following participation in a program. This finding is of most relevance to the current thesis as it suggests that the impact of intervention programs on family practices or routines may be discernible in young children's narratives.

### **Chapter Summary**

Early childhood interventions have the potential to support positive developmental outcomes for vulnerable young children. Parenting programs are one such intervention. Research evidence suggests parenting programs can enhance parent-child relationships, improve parenting skills and confidence, increase parents' social support networks, and improve family functioning. Attachment theory-informed programs also have the potential to support positive parent-child attachment and make positive changes to young children's internal representational models of attachment relationships. Even though children are key stakeholders in parenting programs, research in this area rarely focuses on children's perspectives, and little is understood about how children experience these programs. Moreover, little is known about vulnerable young children's reports of everyday home and family life or their perceptions of changes within their family during involvement in a parenting program.

The next chapter presents the theoretical framework that guided this research.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The literature review emphasised the importance for children of experiencing and participating in environments that promote their wellbeing and protect them against identified risk factors during early childhood. Evidence was also presented for early childhood interventions, such as parenting programs, potentially reducing the effects of social disadvantage and negative developmental outcomes. Many early childhood interventions assume an ecological model and aim to address risk and protective factors in the multiple contexts in which a family functions (Harnett & Dawe, 2008). As such, this thesis is located within and guided by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development.

The bioecological model provides an overarching framework for exploring young children's experiences of program participation and changes within their families during involvement in a parenting program. However, three other theories have also been drawn on in order to apply specific components of the bioecological model. These theories are the new sociology of childhood, ecocultural theory, and attachment theory.

This chapter first provides a brief overview of Bronfenbrenner's early ecological model of human development before discussing in detail the revised bioecological model. Next, key tenets of the new sociology of childhood, ecocultural theory, and attachment theory are presented with links between these theories and the bioecological model. Application of theory to the research is then explained.

#### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model**

Ecological perspectives on family research emerged during the 1970s. One of the most influential was Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development. The following quote provides a succinct definition of this model:

The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21).

The ecological model emphasised the interconnectedness of a set of complex systems that exist between an individual and their environment, and their subsequent impact on human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within this model, the multiple layers of context are recognised as major, interrelated influences on development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceptualised the environment or context as being part of one of four major systems in which child development occurred:

- The *microsystem* is viewed as the most immediate setting containing the developing person. It is the interactions that occur between the person and their immediate environment which most profoundly influence development. The microsystem includes interpersonal relationships with family members or peer networks.
- The *mesosystem* encompasses a system of microsystems that are linked through different contextual settings, such as the home and school, and that influence the person's development (positively or negatively) because of their relationship.
- The *exosystem* refers to interactions that occur in contexts which are more distal from the developing person, such as a parent's workplace or local government. While not directly participating in these interactions, the individual can be directly affected by the significant decisions made within these contexts.

- The *macrosystem* can be described as the ‘blueprint’ which encompasses the overarching, core structures and values that characterise a culture or society and which takes into account the other smaller systems. The macrosystem includes a society’s political, religious, and educational values as well as shared assumptions about human nature such as roles according to sex, age and ethnicity.

While this ecological model of human development was widely accepted, Bronfenbrenner questioned and critiqued the imbalance in knowledge about the environment or context and the developing person. In other words, there was too much emphasis on what constitutes a developmentally relevant environment and not enough detail on the characteristics of the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Bronfenbrenner conceded that his original model was inadequate in capturing the dynamic interactions that occur between the developing person and their environment even though this was the ultimate aim of the model (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, 1995a, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). He revised the original model, resulting in the *bioecological model of human development* which is considered a “more complex and more dynamic structure” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 794).

### **Bioecological Model of Human Development**

Since 1979, Bronfenbrenner’s original model of human development has evolved. The new bioecological paradigm is defined by two propositions based on the dynamic, interactive relationships between the developing person and their environment. Unlike the earlier model, the bioecological model of human development attempts to conceptualise the characteristics of the individual (for example, temperament, motivations, abilities and limitations as well as the role of genes and their manifestation) (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). It sees the individual as playing an active role in their development, rather than remaining a passive bystander at the centre of their complex and interrelated environmental systems (Darling, 2007).

The first proposition constitutes the core of the model and gives focus to the processes of the interactions between the environment and individual characteristics of the developing child. Proposition 1 is as follows:

Especially in its early phases, but also throughout the life course, human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 797).

These stable, continuing interactions have been termed proximal processes and it is these that are considered the principal mechanisms that exert the most influence on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Proposition 2 of the bioecological model of human development stipulates:

The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person, the environment – both immediate and more remote – in which the processes are taking place, the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration, and the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 798).

Within the bioecological model, the proximal processes that occur within a child's microsystem play an important part in shaping that child's development. Bronfenbrenner (1994a) reformulated the definition of a microsystem to include additional elements pertaining to the bioecological paradigm:



A microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment (p. 1645).

### **Proximal Processes**

Proximal processes encompass the interactions that occur between children and the people, activities, objects and symbols present in their immediate environment. They constitute the day-to-day interactions such as feeding or comforting a baby, playing with or reading to a young child, learning new skills, or participating in solitary or group activities (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Within the bioecological model, developmentally effective proximal processes are those interactions that are bidirectional, increasingly more complex, and occur regularly over an extended period of time (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Further, proximal processes may be sustained or conversely, actively interfered with, due to an individual's characteristics. In other words, proximal processes can be fostered or disrupted through the interactions between a child's biological and genetic potentials and their immediate environment or context which in turn, positively or negatively influences that child's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1999), proximal processes also have the ability to buffer against, or reduce environmental differences in developmental outcomes. For example, research conducted by Drillien in 1964 (as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1999), found that social class differences in problem behaviour of young children were reduced based on the quality and duration of mother-child interactions (this being the proximal process). In this example, it was maternal responsiveness that had a significant impact on the child's developmental outcome.

As an extension of this, Bronfenbrenner emphasised the idea that proximal processes lead to outcomes of competence or dysfunction. These outcomes depend on the form, intensity, timing, duration, frequency and predictability of the proximal processes. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) hypothesised that “for outcomes of competence, proximal processes not only lead to higher levels of developmental functioning but also serve to reduce and act as a buffer against effects of disadvantaged and disruptive environments” (p. 805). It is important to also bear in mind that proximal processes and developmental outcomes are not only influenced by the resources available within environmental contexts, but in order to function effectively, proximal processes require environments that are characterised by stability, consistency, and predictability that prevail over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

### **The Concept of Time**

The concept of time was introduced in Bronfenbrenner’s later work and is a defining property of the bioecological model of human development. Time, within this model, has three successive levels: microtime, mesotime and macrotime. The continuity or discontinuity in episodes of proximal processes is referred to as microtime. Mesotime relates to the regularity or frequency of these episodes over broader time periods, such as weeks or months. Lastly, macrotime encompasses the changing expectations and events that occur in broader society (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

### **Application of the Bioecological Model in the Current Research**

While Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of human development provided an overarching and guiding theoretical framework for this thesis, other theories were drawn on as a way of apply components of Bronfenbrenner’s theory. These theories were the new sociology of childhood, ecocultural theory, and attachment theory. This section discusses

these theories, their links with bioecological theory, and how they have been applied to the current research.

### **New Sociology of Childhood**

The valuing of children's experiences and the right to express their views is embraced in the new sociology of childhood. This theoretical framework sees children as capable social actors in their own right who contribute competently to all facets of the world around them (MacNaughton, Smith, & Lawrence, 2004; Matthews, 2007; Mayall, 2002; Prout & James, 1997). The 'new sociology of childhood' understands childhood as a social construction. For example, Prout and James (1997) argued, "children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live" (p. 8). This way of viewing childhood supports the notion that children are experts in their own lives and has provided a theoretical framework for contemporary researchers who are interested in exploring children's perspectives of their lived experiences (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Moss et al., 2005). In their writing, MacNaughton et al. (2004) highlight the following three key ideas in the 'new' thinking about young children:

Young children can construct valid meanings about the world and their place in it;  
young children know the world in alternative (not 'inferior') ways to adults; and  
young children's perspectives and insights can help adults to understand their experiences better. (p. 15).

It is important to include the voices of children in research agendas as their thoughts, perceptions and interests may be different from and independent to those of adults, and have more salience for them than adult ideas about children's experiences and thoughts. In this way of thinking, children are no longer simply viewed as passive objects, as part of a family unit

or as beings whose views or needs are expressed on their behalf by the adults in their lives (Prout & James, 1997). Rather, through the lens of the new sociology of childhood, children are seen as having their own unique view of the world on topics that are important to them and as participants in the construction of knowledge based on their daily experiences. This reconceptualisation of children and childhood also questions the appropriateness of having adults act as proxies for children in research (Kirk, 2007; Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke, & Craig, 1996). If we are committed to learning about children's experiences, "we need to elicit their representations and seek information directly from them" (Kirk, 2007, p. 1252).

**Link with bioecological theory.** While the new sociology of childhood did not originate from developmental science, parallels can be drawn with the bioecological paradigm. By definition, the bioecological model of human development views children as active agents in relation to their environment (context) as well as to themselves. The model also understands children's "increasing capacity and active propensity" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 811) to conceptualise and understand their own unique experiences and interactions. Like the bioecological theory, the new sociology of childhood also views children as active (rather than passive) agents who contribute to and shape their daily lives (Grieshaber, 2007; Prout & James, 1997). In addition, the new sociology of childhood, as with Bronfenbrenner's model, acknowledges the competency of children to share their experiences about aspects of their own lives.

**Application of theory through a focus on capturing children's perspectives.** In the current research, many of the data collection activities (e.g., child-led photography/interviews) are underpinned by the idea that children are social and active agents capable of sharing their own experiences on matters that affect their lives. Moreover, capturing children's perspectives provided a unique insight to children's own experiences in

the contexts in which they participate, and how they potentially shape or influence interactions that occurred in these contexts.

### **Ecocultural Theory**

Ecocultural theory was developed by Gallimore, Weisner and colleagues from the Sociobehavioural Research Group at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). It draws on anthropological, cross-cultural human developmental research and sociocultural and activity theory and research (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989).

Ecocultural theory brings together a person's ecology (environment) with their culture (the beliefs, meanings and values that a cultural community such as a family learn and share) (Bernheimer, Gallimore, & Weisner, 1990). Gallimore, Weisner, Bernheimer, Guthrie and Nihira (1993) propose that the creation of a sustainable and meaningful daily routine of family life is universal and is the major adaptive task facing families. Ecocultural theory labels these 'daily routines' and their interactions as 'activity settings'.

Activity settings "provide opportunities for children to learn and develop through modelling, joint participation, task engagement, and other forms of mediated social learning that are embedded in goal-directed interactions" (Gallimore et al., 1989, p. 217). These include the everyday parent-child interactions from 'homely and familiar' tasks such as eating dinner, watching television or getting ready for bed to the 'deliberate teaching opportunities' such as reading a book together or visiting a museum (Gallimore et al., 1989). Five components or variables that constitute activity settings have been identified and it is these activity settings that are argued to be a "perceptible instantiation of ecology and culture" (Gallimore et al., 1989, p. 217) The components are: the people who are present; the values and goals of those present; the tasks being performed; the reasons they are being performed (the motives and feelings surrounding the action); and the scripts that govern the interaction, including those that shape and constrain the child's participation.

Ecocultural theorists use activity settings as their units of analysis. Using activity settings as units of analysis provides a logical criterion for identifying ecological variables that may influence a child's development. Gallimore et al. (1989) also suggest that it is the sustainability of daily routines across multiple activity settings, rather than factors such as socio-economic status or the number of social network supports, that provide better predictors of child and family outcomes.

A family's *ecocultural niche* is constructed from these daily routines and activity settings. The ecocultural niche is not static but fluid and constantly changes as families make accommodations due to broader cultural and socio-economic constraints and resources (Gallimore et al., 1989). A family's ecocultural niche is explored through 10 dimensions of family life established by ecocultural theory (Gallimore et al., 1989). The dimensions were originally created to examine experiences and decision-making of families of children with disabilities (Gallimore et al., 1993; Gallimore et al., 1989).

- Dimension 1: Socioeconomic Status (e.g., income, general family financial situation, employment status of father and mother, ability to pay for services)
- Dimension 2: Services (e.g., number of services family uses, satisfaction with services, parent involvement in school activities or child's learning)
- Dimension 3: Home (e.g., safety of neighbourhood for child, family focus on changing the structure of the home environment for child)
- Dimension 4: Domestic Workload (e.g., level of family activity focused on child care, older siblings available to help, father participation in child care/domestic tasks, overall availability of help in the household)
- Dimension 5: Connectedness (e.g., connected family)

- Dimension 6: Friendship Networks (e.g., child has friends, child's participation in peer groups)
- Dimension 7: Diversity (e.g., cultural diversity of neighbourhood, family support networks, and other services involved in child's life)
- Dimension 8: Support (e.g., support from spouse/partner, religious and professional support, support mother receives in the household, family and friends' support)
- Dimension 9: Information (e.g., information received by professionals)
- Dimension 10: Disability Networks (e.g., involvement of child in disability networks and services) (Gallimore et al., 1989, p. 228).

Accommodations families make in constructing their everyday routines can be explored through these dimensions (most often using an Ecocultural Family Interview conducted with parents) (Gallimore et al., 1989, p. 218) :

Hence, the study of activity settings, and the econiche from which they arise, can begin with parents' accounts of their daily routines. As they describe their accommodations, the alternatives they considered, and what trade offs and compromises were made to achieve a stable daily routine, parents are revealing how they have socially constructed the ecocultural niche of their family.

**Links with bioecological theory.** According to the bioecological model, proximal processes are key components in fostering or disrupting optimal child development. Similarly, ecocultural theory considers a family's daily routines and interactions or the activity settings, as influencing children's development. Activity settings are comparable to proximal processes in bioecological theory. However, operationalising proximal processes from the bioecological

model poses some problems. For example, how should the units of analysis be organised and what variables should be included within each system of a person's ecological environment (Gallimore et al., 1989). Some of this can be addressed through ecocultural theory as a family's daily routines (or proximal processes) are considered the critical units of analysis.

**Application of theory through a focus on everyday routines.** In the current research, children were asked to report on the proximal processes or the everyday routines and interactions that occurred in their families. To achieve this, an ecocultural child interview was used (Grace & Bowes, 2009). This interview focused on concrete day-to-day routines to understand how children described and perceived their lives in the home context, and captured their unique perspectives of change in their families during involvement in a parenting program. The current study did not organise the ecocultural child interview around all 10 ecocultural dimensions. Instead, certain dimensions or aspects of dimensions (e.g., Domestic Workload, Connectedness, Services, Structure of the Home Environment, and Friendship Networks) were considered as a priori constructs in the ecocultural child interview and during qualitative data analysis. This decision was based on findings from previous research that has used ecocultural child interviews (see Grace & Bowes, 2009; Grace et al., 2011).

### **Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory was developed in the late 1950s by Bowlby and subsequently operationalised by Ainsworth. It draws on ethology, developmental psychology and psychoanalysis (Bretherton, 1995). Bowlby (1979) states, "... attachment theory is a way of conceptualising the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others and of explaining the many forms of emotional distress and personality disturbance, including anxiety, anger, depression, and emotional attachment, to which unwilling separation and loss give rise" (p. 127).



Attachment has been theorised as “an organised behavioural system that is activated, not only by physical or environmental threats, but also by threats to relationships such as separation from the attachment figure, or rejection” (Bacon & Richardson, 2001, p. 377). Further to this, attachment relationships are seen to be largely determined by the emotional availability and responsiveness of a caregiver to a child’s needs. When consistently present these provide a child with a secure base (Finzi, Cohen, Sapir, & Weizman, 2000; Hoffman et al., 2006; Lee et al., 2010; Stronach et al., 2013). It is from this secure base that a child can explore their environment and have a safe place to return (Bowlby, 1979). In this theory, children are thought to develop representations or ‘internal working models’ of self, others and the relationship between self and others through early experiences with their caregivers (Bowlby, 1969, 1979). Attachment theory suggests that these internal working models are the basis for personal-social development and subsequently form a prototype for a person’s relationships through the life span (Bowlby, 1979; Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 1999).

Intergenerational transmission of patterns of insecure attachment is perpetuated by familial cycles of violence and abuse. Research completed by Styron and Janoff-Bulman (1997), however, suggested that the long-term impact of childhood abuse may be buffered by early attachment experiences, particularly if the attachment to the mother was secure. Further to this, research suggests that reflections by adults on their negative experiences of being parented during childhood have the potential to change their adult attachment patterns (Bacon & Richardson, 2001; Stronach et al., 2013; Toth et al., 2002).

**Links with bioecological theory.** Bronfenbrenner draws heavily on attachment research (for example Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1979; Sroufe, 1990) in explaining how proximal processes in the parent-child dyad can foster or hinder the development of a strong emotional attachment between a child and their parent or caregiver. The importance placed on the proximal processes within the context of the parent-child dyad

and the resulting positive or negative developmental outcomes are evident in the bioecological model. This led to the formulation of the following proposition by Bronfenbrenner based on attachment theory:

In order to develop – intellectually, emotionally, socially, and morally – a child requires, for all of them, the same thing: participation in progressively more complex reciprocal activity, on a regular basis over extended periods of time with one or more other persons with whom the child develops a strong, mutual, irrational attachment, and who are committed to that child's development, preferably for life (Bronfenbrenner, 1994b, p. 5).

In bioecological theory, the parent-child interactions are viewed as measurable mechanisms of internal working models. This theory also purports that early proximal processes can be thought of as producing subsequent proximal processes throughout a child's development and within different contexts. These aspects of bioecological theory (that is, the importance of reciprocal, sensitive, and enduring proximal processes in the parent-child dyad in relation to a child's development) mirror the key tenets of attachment theory.

**Application of theory through a focus on changes in children's attachment representations.** In terms of research design, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) emphasised that the most relevant implication of attachment theory to the bioecological model lies in assessing the quality of a child's attachment relationship at different time points. In the current research, this was operationalised by the inclusion of a narrative story completion task. This was used to capture change in young children's attachment representations over two time points during involvement in an intensive, attachment-based parenting program.

## **Chapter Summary**

The current research was guided by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development. It explored two microsystems (or face-to-face settings) in which vulnerable young children participated: their home environment and the parenting program they attended (or the supported playgroup or preschool). Proximal processes that occurred in each of these settings, and how children described and perceived these experiences during involvement in a parenting program were explored in the research. In addition, the current study attempted to explore the degree to which involvement in one microsystem, the parenting program, potentially influenced or facilitated change over time in the child's experiences of another microsystem, their home environment.

This thesis also drew on other theories – the new sociology of childhood, ecocultural theory, and attachment theory – that shared theoretical elements or understandings with bioecological theory. In doing so, the current study was able to apply specific components of the bioecological model, particularly through the data collection activities. This will be discussed further in the next chapter on design and methods.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DESIGN AND METHODS**

The current research had two primary aims. The first was to understand the experiences of vulnerable young children who accompany their parents to a parenting program. The second was to explore young children's experiences of everyday family life and understand how children perceive changes that occur in their families during program participation. In order to address these aims, the research adopted a mixed methods approach, included two comparison groups and had a longitudinal design with three phases of data collection.

This chapter begins with a presentation of the research questions and sub-questions addressed by the current study. A review of the qualitative methods used in previous research with young children, including the Mosaic approach which underpinned the methodology for the current research, is then provided. Ethical considerations, design and research context, participants, measures and procedure, and approach to data analysis are then described in detail.

#### **Research Questions**

The research reported in this thesis contributes to addressing these gaps in the literature by answering the following research questions and sub-questions:

1. How do young children experience and describe program participation, and does this change over time?
  - Is there a difference between the three programs in the quality of children's peer interactions, and does the quality of peer interactions change over time during program participation?

- How do mothers perceive their children's program participation, and does this change over time?
2. How do young children perceive everyday home and family life during program participation, and does this change over time?

With the research involving children aged 3- to 5-years-old, the choice of appropriate research methods was an important consideration. A range of child-friendly, accessible, and valid qualitative data gathering methods were used to capture children's perspectives of program participation and everyday home life. In addition, standardised, quantitative measures were used to assess relevant aspects of the children's development, home and family life, and attachment representations.

### **Ways of Including Children's Voices in Research**

Graue and Walsh (1995) have argued for the importance of early childhood research methodologies that capture children's experiences and perceptions. Many of the research methods used in early childhood research are designed to be child-friendly, task-based, and quite different from those used traditionally with adults (Schiller & Einarsdottir, 2009). This is not to say that children are incapable of engaging with research methods used with adults, rather that, "methods which are more sensitive to children's particular competencies or interests can enable children to feel more at ease with an adult researcher" (Punch, 2002, p. 330).

Many methods have been used in research with young children. These include interviews (Grace & Bowes, 2009; Grace et al., 2011), persona dolls (Jesuvadian & Wright, 2009), puppets (Ablow, Measelle, Cowan, & Cowan, 2009; Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, Baruchel, & Jones, 2008; Measelle, John, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 2005), photographs (Clark & Moss, 2009; DeMarie, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2003; Einarsdottir, 2005a;

Stephenson, 2009), drawings (Einarsdottir et al., 2009; MacDonald, 2009), computer-assisted interviews (Powell & Wilson, 2004; Reich, Cottler, McCallum, Corwin, & VanEerdewegh, 1995), and vignettes (Konstantareas & Desbois, 2001; MacNaughton, 2003; Wagland & Bussey, 2005). The appropriateness of the method depends on the research questions being asked and the characteristics of research participants.

Photography and face-to-face interviews have been used extensively in research with young children and have shown promise as a means of capturing children's lived experiences. As such, these two particular methods warranted further consideration in relation to the current study.

### **Photography**

Young children's own photography has been employed by researchers as an effective strategy for exploring their perspectives. This method has been used extensively in early childhood research including research about young children's perspectives of the important places and people in their preschool setting (Clark & Moss, 2009), the redesign of an outdoor play space (Clark & Moss, 2005), children's perspectives on their life in an early childhood setting (Einarsdottir, 2005a), children's views about starting school (Dockett & Perry, 2003), children's perspectives of a preschool field trip (DeMarie, 2001), and young children's experiences of curriculum in early childhood centres (Stephenson, 2009).

Researchers have also employed photographs as a conversational focus with young children. For example, Smith et al. (2005) used photographs of recent activities in an early childhood setting as interview prompts with young children to explore their engagement with learning. Other early childhood researchers, such as Clark and Statham (2005) and Greenfield (2011), have also used photographs which have been taken by the child participants to facilitate conversations with them.

Advocates of this research method highlight a number of benefits. Children feel empowered as they are given freedom over a camera and the photographs that are taken (Stephenson, 2009). Photographs provide the ability to ‘fix everyday experiences’ and are a way for children to visually record their experiences (Clark, 2010a). Einarsdottir (2005a) also suggested that using the children’s photographs as prompts or as the focus for interviews ensures that the interview elicits understandings and observations from the child’s perspective. It is important to bear in mind that children’s photographs tell only a partial story of their experiences, and it is the subsequent conversations with children and their own explanations of the photographs that provide a more complete picture (Einarsdottir, 2005a; Mason & Falloon, 1999).

An ethical problem in the use of photography was highlighted in research on children’s experiences of independence growing up in an isolated and rural community in Bolivia (Punch, 2002). Punch (2002) suggested that this technique may have left some children feeling disappointed at being unable to continue taking photographs as the financial cost of a camera for their family may have been too great. The use of cameras with the children also caused resentment among some of the community members as they felt that encouraging children to use this “expensive technique ... instilled unrealistic ideas into their heads about wanting to be photographers” (Punch, 2002, p. 334). This dilemma was not anticipated in the current study as cameras and the use of smart phones for both communication and photography is widespread in Australia, even in areas of social disadvantage. Further, in early childhood education and care settings, cameras are commonly used by both staff and children. In the pilot study stage of the current research, it was also demonstrated that child-led photography was an effective data gathering method (see Baird, 2013).

Early childhood researchers have found child-led photography helpful in research with young children. This method offers the opportunity to communicate in a meaningful way that does not rely on the written or spoken word. This is particularly beneficial when working with young children whose language and literacy skills are still developing (Clark et al., 2003; Einarsdottir, 2005a).

## **Interviews**

Interviews with young children have often been used alongside or in conjunction with other research methods (Carr, 2000; Clark & Moss, 2005, 2009) and both individual and group interviews have provided rich narratives on the lives of children (Brooker, 2001; Graue & Walsh, 1995). Interviews with young children have been used effectively in early childhood research including studies on children's experiences of prior-to-school care settings (Grace & Bowes, 2009); children's engagement with learning (Smith et al., 2005); children's experiences of friendship during the transition to school (Peters, 2003); children's perceptions of body image (Birbeck & Drummond, 2006); and children's perceptions and experiences of place, space and physical activity (Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005a).

Beyond pure research, government departments and child-focused organisations in Australia and internationally are using interviews and focus groups as a way of gathering children's perspectives on policy and practice. The New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, for example, uses interviews and focus groups often in their research and consultation with children and young people. This includes 4-year-old children participating in focus groups on research about important issues that affect their lives (New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, 2004). The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (ARACY, 2012) recently utilised interviews and focus groups with young children to gather their perspectives on improvements to health, wellbeing and life opportunities for young Australians. In addition, the Stirling Council in



Scotland used interviews and focus groups to engage young children in consultation about early childhood services (Kinney, 2005).

A conversational-style approach to interviews has been used by Mayall (2008) in a study of children's experiences of health care, and by Dockett and Perry (2005) in their research with young children on their transition to school. Dockett (2008, November) argued that informal conversations with children (as opposed to formal interviews) helped children feel more comfortable and enabled them to finish (and resume) the conversation whenever they wanted.

Grace and Bowes (2011) and Langsted (1994) have also emphasised the importance of using interview questions that are meaningful to child participants. One example of this is an ecocultural child interview (discussed in detail later in this chapter). This style of interview focuses on the everyday routines of home and family life. Children are asked concrete questions about what they do during the day rather than about abstract ideas. Grace et al. (2011) advocate that such interviews are more likely to engage young children and capture their lived experiences.

Small-group interviews or focus groups have also been used effectively in early childhood research on children's experiences (Clark, 2010b; Dockett & Perry, 2003; Mason & Falloon, 1999). Focus groups enable sharing of ideas or experiences among the children, and can also facilitate a shift in the power imbalance between the adult researcher and the child participants (Hill, 1997; Mason & Falloon, 1999). However, the use of focus groups may prevent less articulate, younger or shy children from fully engaging in the research process, especially when older or more outspoken children are involved (Bruner, 1985; Hill, 1997). To alleviate some of the difficulties or issues encountered when using focus groups (or other

forms of interview) with children, Clark (2010a) recommends researchers be mindful of and sensitive to individual children's preferences and skills before commencing an interview.

There has been some concern about the appropriateness of using interviews with young children as they may become monosyllabic during questioning or may try to guess the 'right answer' for the researcher (Clark, 2005a). In response to these concerns, early childhood researchers highlight the need for careful preparation for researchers when interviewing young children including being aware and respectful of the child's language, cultural group or class (Brooker, 2001). Building and maintaining rapport as well as conducting the interview in a familiar, safe environment for the child may also lead to a more positive engagement in the interview process by young children (Eide & Winger, 2005; Punch, 2002; Stephenson, 2009).

A number of research methods, such as photography and interviews, have demonstrated that young children's perspectives can be elicited. However, when used in isolation these methods may not be as effective for all children due to the limitations discussed above. The next section examines one approach that seeks to overcome the limitations of these discrete methods by combining them when conducting research with young children.

### **The Mosaic Approach**

This approach was developed as a research methodology for listening to young children about their own lives (Clark & Moss, 2009). It acknowledges children as competent social actors and as experts on issues that affect them. By drawing on the notion of 'the hundred languages of children' (Morrow, 1998), the Mosaic approach is a multi-method framework that combines both visual and verbal tools (Hill, 1997). In this way, young

children are able to share their perspectives and experiences in many different and creative ways (Clark & Statham, 2005).

Clark and Moss (2009, p. 5) identified the following elements as being key to the Mosaic approach:

- Multi-method: recognises the different ‘voices’ or languages of children
- Participatory: treats children as experts and agents in their own lives
- Reflexive: includes children, practitioners and parents in reflecting on meanings, and addresses the question of interpretation
- Adaptable: can be applied in a variety of early childhood institutions
- Focused on children’s lived experiences: can be used for a variety of different purposes including looking at lives rather than knowledge gained or care received
- Embedded into practice: a framework for listening that has the potential to be both used as an evaluative tool and to become embedded into early years practice.

The Mosaic approach combines traditional research methods such as interviews and observations with participatory tools such as child-led photography, photo-book making, child-led tours, and map-making (Clark, 2005b). The use of different methods and activities provides young children with multiple ways of expressing their views. This approach brings together all the information to create a ‘mosaic’ or complete picture from the child’s perspective (Clark, 2007; Clark & Moss, 2009; Clark & Statham, 2005).

The Mosaic approach has been used extensively and effectively in research with preschool aged children. Studies that have used this approach include investigations of young children’s perspectives of the important places and people in their preschool setting (Clark &

Moss, 2009); the redesign of an outdoor play space (Clark & Moss, 2005); curriculum in early childhood centres (Stephenson, 2009); quality in early childhood classrooms in Singapore (Harcourt, 2008); children's experiences and reflections on their time in early childhood settings (Baird, 2013; Daly et al., 2007); and the experiences of children with brain tumours and their parents as they engaged with the health care system in the United Kingdom (Soanes, Hargrave, Smith, & Gibson, 2009).

Early childhood researchers who have used the Mosaic approach in research with young children have encountered some difficulties in relation to the data gathering methods. Stephenson (2009) acknowledged several challenges of using cameras and child-led photography as a strategy for eliciting 2- to 4-year-old children's experiences of their early childhood centre. At times, Stephenson (2009) had to balance respecting how long a child needed to use the camera to capture their experiences of the centre with ensuring all children had a turn at taking photographs. Stephenson (2009) admitted to deliberately not bringing the camera on some days as it tended to drive the research agenda when it was used by the children.

Unlike other researchers who have used the Mosaic approach, Baird (2013) found that the child-led tours did not work during the methodological pilot study for the current research conducted in an early childhood centre. Baird (2013) suggested that this was most likely due to factors related to the early childhood centre's particular set-up and context, including limited space, number of children present and the centre's daily routine. Baird (2013) also found that discussion around photographs taken by the children was limited, with most children providing no more detail about their photographs than simply naming the people, places or objects present. Greenfield (2011) encountered a similar challenge when children viewed their photographs. In this situation, children often provided only short responses to questions asked or simply nodded or smiled.

While these challenges posed some difficulties for Baird (2013), Greenfield (2011), and Stephenson (2009), the use of several data gathering methods in the Mosaic approach provided opportunities for children to express their views in ways that worked best for them. Further, the benefits of prolonged engagement and sustained interactions when completing research with young children cannot be discounted (Baird, 2013; Stephenson, 2009). The Mosaic approach lends itself well to this, providing opportunities for young children to exercise some autonomy in choosing when and how to engage in the data gathering methods. The approach also allows the researcher to construct a richer narrative and draw conclusions from more than a single research interaction or conversation with a young child.

The Mosaic approach has been drawn on extensively to underpin the methodology for the current research. As the Mosaic approach uses several participatory and adaptable data collection activities, the young children involved in the current research were given the opportunity to share their perspectives in multiple ways. The Mosaic approach was also selected for the current research due to its identified usefulness for including the voices of young, hard-to-reach or disadvantaged children whose views have often been excluded from research that relies on more traditional methods (Clark & Statham, 2005).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Prior to commencement of the research, ethics approval was obtained from the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 1 for ethics approval letter). A number of ethical considerations arise during research with young children including gaining informed consent, unequal power relationships, understanding the potential for physical, emotional or psychological harm, confidentiality, and providing safe spaces for children to share their views without fear of criticism or challenge (Birbeck & Drummond, 2007; Coady, 2001; Powell, 2011). The following section addresses some of these concerns and discusses the ethical procedures that were implemented in the current research.

## **Informed Consent**

Conroy and Harcourt (2009) argued that informing young children about research, including the purpose, methodology and who will see the research results, is a critical aspect of the research process and supports children's authentic participation. This means developing appropriately tailored information in different forms for children taking into account their age as well as developmental stage (Kirk, 2007). Thompson (1992) further highlighted this issue by stating "children from a surprisingly early age can understand the basic elements of the research process and their role within it if this information is presented in an age-appropriate manner" (p. 60). While it is essential that parents provide consent for their children to participate in research, it is equally important for researchers to provide young children with opportunities to understand what it means to be involved in research and to respect the right of the child to make their own informed decision about participation (Eide & Winger, 2005; Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010; Flewitt, 2005).

In the current research, following parental consent, a specific child information and consent form was used to talk with the children about the research (see Appendix 2). This included information about the activities ('I'll give you a camera so you can take photos of the things that are special to you at [program name]'), recording of the data ('If it's okay with your mum/dad and you, I'd like to record what you say on a little recorder') and confidentiality and disclosure ('Everything you say to me will be just between us unless you tell me something that makes me worry that you are not safe'). The children were encouraged to ask any questions they might have had, all of which were answered before the researcher invited the children to participate in the research. Children who agreed to participate were provided with a consent form to make their special mark of consent (their name or a drawing). At the beginning of each phase of data collection, the researcher reaffirmed with the child their continued willingness to participate prior to commencing any activities.

## **Unequal Power Relationships**

The power imbalances that exist in broader society between children and adults also need to be addressed in research. This includes issues such as children feeling pressured or coerced to participate, feeling unable to withdraw from research and feeling unable to express their genuine views during the research process (Kirk, 2007). A number of strategies have been proposed for managing the inherent power imbalance between child participants and adult researchers including using methods that allow children to feel part of the research process, using group interviews, being aware of children's willingness to participate and giving children control of interview equipment such as tape recorders (Hill, 2006; Kirk, 2007). Morrow and Richards (1996) suggested that imbalanced power relationships may begin to be overcome by using research methods that are non-invasive, non-confrontational and participatory.

In the current research, during the consent process and throughout the research, the participating children were reminded that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Children were also reminded that they did not need to participate in any activity they chose not to, or answer any questions they did not want to. Children were given the choice of interview location and interview type (one-on-one or small group). The researcher also ensured she sat on the same level as the child at all times during the research process (usually the floor, on child-size furniture, or on the ground in the outdoor play areas). The Mosaic approach also gave young children power over the research process as they could choose from a range of participatory data collection activities.

## **Confidentiality and Disclosure of Information**

Kirk (2007) highlighted the transferability of the ethical principles underpinning research with children to research with adults. Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry (2009) also raised the issue of children's rights to privacy and confidentiality and suggested researchers

should reflect regularly on how they respect the trust children place in them when sharing their experiences and perspectives. To this end, researchers should respect the right of the child to confidentiality in all they say to adults while participating in research. In addition, children need to be informed by researchers that their identity will be protected and they will remain anonymous (pseudonyms will be used) during the research process and in dissemination of the results.

The potential for disclosure of information that suggests a child is at risk of harm (or has been harmed in some way) presents researchers with an ethical dilemma when dealing with confidentiality and remains a contentious issue in the literature. Some researchers (e.g., Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010) consider it common practice to encourage the child to talk with adults who could help (or agree to have the researcher talk on their behalf). However, this is not a universally accepted practice (Powell, 2011). Lynch, Glaser, Prior and Inwood (1999) advocate that the child's safety is paramount and would breach confidentiality if necessary while other researchers believe that disclosure of abuse should only occur after the child consents and following discussion (Hill, 2006). Regardless of this, researchers should clearly state the limits of confidentiality on information sheets and verbally. Parents and children need to be informed of the limitations of confidentiality before participating in any research. Fargas-Malet, et al. (2010) suggested that for young children this could be "expressed as the difference between what can be 'just between you and me' and what may need to be told to others 'to stop someone from getting hurt.'" (p. 180). Appropriate and adequate protocols or procedures need to be in place and followed in the event of disclosure.

Some of the families involved in the current study, particularly those who attended the parenting program, may have been referred to the programs by child protection authorities, and as such have a history of child maltreatment concerns. It was a possibility that these



children might disclose information during the research that suggested child maltreatment. Parents were informed that the researcher would need to report to program staff any information disclosed by the children that suggested they were being harmed or were unsafe. This procedure followed the child protection protocol in place at each of the programs. As mentioned previously, children were also made aware of the limits of confidentiality during the information and consent process ('Everything you say to me will be just between us unless you tell me something that makes me worry that you are not safe') as suggested by Fargas-Malet et al. (2010).

### **Critical Reflection**

The literature also emphasises the importance of adult researchers practising critical reflection at every stage of the research process (see Hatch, 1995; Keddie, 2000; Powell, 2011). Reflexivity and flexibility need to play a central role in the research process particularly in the choice and implementation of research methods (Powell, 2011). The overarching question behind research with young children should be whether it is helping the voices of children be heard so that researchers may understand children from the child's perspective (Keddie, 2000).

Reflexivity is fundamental to the Mosaic approach. In this approach, reflexivity shifts the ownership of 'expert' from the adult researcher to the child participant. From early on in the current research process, the researcher actively engaged and participated in the children's daily lives at the program and became an 'authentic novice' who was genuinely interested in understanding the children's views of program participation and family change. The Mosaic approach, by its nature, provides flexibility in how children engage with the research process by offering a range of participatory and traditional research methods. The reflexive use of participatory methods in this research provided children with several options for engaging in the research while also allowing the researcher to adapt activities to suit the child. Prolonged

engagement and presence of the researcher at the programs also provided opportunities to reflect critically on the research process and the data collection methods over time.

### **Research Design**

The current research adopted a longitudinal, mixed method design. The next section provides an explanation for this research design.

### **Research Context and Sites**

Three different early childhood interventions were included in the current research. The first was an intensive, attachment-based parenting program and was considered the primary focus of the current research. Two other early childhood interventions, a supported playgroup and a preschool, were considered comparison groups. Comparison groups were included in this research primarily to control for changes in the children's perceptions due to maturation. A description of each of the programs is provided in the following section.

**Parenting program.** The parenting program was an attachment-based, intensive, therapeutic child protection and parenting education program operated under licence in several Australian states. In New South Wales, the parenting program was located in several suburbs of Western Sydney. The program works with families facing potential or actual child protection issues and aims to break the cycle of destructive family behaviour, facilitate positive parent-child relationships and develop self-esteem in parents (Mondy & Mondy, 2008a). Parents participate in therapeutic support groups and personal development programs consisting of a number of components to develop skills and knowledge in areas such as parenting, child abuse and neglect, child development and parent-child attachment. Play and early learning activities (e.g., art and craft, toys, and literacy activities) are provided for the children by Play Facilitators. Children 0- to 5-years-old attend the program with their mothers at least two four-hour days per week for between 12 to 24 months. The current research

involved children from two of these centres located in two suburbs of Western Sydney identified as areas of severe social disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

**Supported playgroup.** The supported playgroup was operated by a non-government child and family organisation in the outer western suburbs of Sydney. The organisation combines a strengths-based, family-centred approach to deliver a range of integrated early childhood services (including early childhood education and care programs, supported playgroups, community hubs, early intervention programs, and early childhood disability services). Many of these programs are located in vulnerable and socially disadvantaged communities. The supported playgroup was held in a community building within the grounds of a public school. Parents and their children aged 0- to 5-years-old attended the supported playgroup two days per week for two hours each time. Early childhood learning activities, including art and craft (and messy play), toys (e.g., puzzles, musical instruments, and ‘home corner’), and literacy activities (book reading) were provided by trained early childhood workers. Parenting information and support were also available.

**Preschool.** The preschool, located in a suburb of outer Western Sydney, was operated by the same non-government child and family organisation that conducted the supported playgroup involved in this research. The preschool offered an inclusive and flexible play-based early education and care program for children aged 3- to 6-years-old. Children attended the preschool up to five days per week and engaged in child-led and teacher-supported learning activities. The preschool was included in the study for a number of reasons: to present another layer of data about children’s experiences of the environments in which they participate, and to provide a comparison group of children who were not attending a service that targeted children at risk.

Table 4.1 provides the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) based on the relative socio-economic disadvantage scores for each of the research site suburbs.

Table 4.1

*Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage Scores for Research Sites (SEIFA)*

Program	Score	Rank	Percentile
Parenting Program 1	890	235	10
Parenting Program 2	623	9	1
Supported Playgroup	920	405	16
Preschool	1031	1616	64

*Note.* SEIFA = Socio-Economic Index for Areas; a lower score indicates that an area is relatively disadvantaged compared to an area with a higher score ( $M=1000$ ,  $SD=100$ ); Rank is within New South Wales, where the most disadvantaged suburb is given a ranking of 1; Percentile is based on the lowest 1% of areas being given a percentile number of 1 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

As can be seen in Table 4.1, of the programs involved in the current research, the parenting program was located in the most disadvantaged suburbs, one of which was ranked as the ninth most disadvantaged suburb in New South Wales. In comparison, the preschool was located in a considerably more advantaged suburb than the parenting program and the supported playgroup.

### **Stages of the Research**

A longitudinal research design was adopted as the current project was focused on capturing change over time in children's experiences of program participation and everyday home life. As such, the research included a pilot study and a longitudinal main study comprised of a baseline phase (Phase 1), and two further data collection phases to capture change over time (Phase 2 and Phase 3). This design also allowed the researcher to spend considerable time at the research sites interacting with the participants. This in turn provided

opportunities to study in depth the children's experiences of participation and family change during involvement in a parenting program.

During data collection the researcher spent two days per week (two to four hours each day) for four to six weeks at each research site (the two parenting program centres, one supported playgroup and one preschool). All data collection activities and measures were completed at the research sites. Due to constraints (a single person collecting the data from all sites) and the time commitment required of the Mosaic approach (prolonged, consistent engagement) data could not be collected at all four research sites simultaneously. The order of data collection for each phase was the parenting program (site 1) and the supported playgroup then the parenting program (site 2) and the preschool.

Only a brief review of the pilot study's methodology will be presented in this section as reflections on the use of both the Mosaic and Ecocultural approaches informing a complementary and child-friendly methodology have been published in the *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* (Baird, 2013). The article is attached as an appendix (Appendix 3).

**Pilot study.** An exploratory pilot study of children's experiences of participation in their early childhood centre and home environments was conducted testing several methodologies. Six 3- and 4-year-old children were recruited from an early childhood centre (long day-care centre) in a demographically similar area of Western Sydney to the suburbs where the parenting program was located. The long day-care centre was operated by the same organisation that operates the parenting program. It was thought that the children's participation in this research context paralleled, to some extent, that of the parenting program. That is, children attended an intensive, centre-based program several days per week and participated in structured and unstructured learning activities.

The pilot study was designed to test a suite of child-focused measures before commencement of the larger study. The pilot study's methodology was informed by the Mosaic (Clark & Moss, 2009) and Ecocultural<sup>7</sup> (Gallimore et al., 1989) approaches. While the data collection methods of these two approaches had been used in research previously, the pilot study was the first time the methods had been used together to explore young children's experiences of their environments. For this reason, the pilot study provided an important opportunity to assess whether these particular approaches would work in combination with preschool-aged children.

The MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB) (Bretherton, Oppenheim, Emde, & MacArthur Narrative Working Group, 2003) was also included in the pilot study. The MSSB uses story stem and doll play to assess attachment (parent-child) as well as aspects of moral, emotional and social development in children from as young as 3-years-old. This measure was trialed in the pilot study for two reasons: to gauge young children's ability to engage with and complete this measure, and to familiarise the researcher with administration of this measure.

The data collection methods used in the pilot study are presented in Table 4.2.

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<sup>7</sup> In the pilot study, a child ecocultural interview was used to understand how children described and perceived all of the activities (routines) that made up their day. Children were asked questions about key family activity settings such as getting up in the morning ('What happens when you get up in the morning?'), eating dinner ('What happens at dinner time?'), and playtime ('Is there someone you play with?').

Table 4.2

*Overview of Data Collection Methods used in the Pilot Study*

Children's experiences	Approach	Method/ activity
Young children's experiences of their early childhood centre	Mosaic	Child-led photography and photo-book making  Child-led tours and map-making  Child participation interview (program)  Researcher observations
Young children's experiences of their everyday home life	Ecocultural	Ecocultural child interview (everyday family routines)
Young children's narrative representations of their attachment relationships	Attachment	Macarthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB)

*Note.* Six story stems from the MSSB (Bretherton et al., 2003) that specifically focused on the parent-child attachment relationship were used during the pilot study.

A period of reflection followed completion of the pilot study. During this time, the methods, procedures and the quality of data gathered were reviewed to determine the usefulness of the methodologies for understanding young children's experiences of the environments in which they participate. Methods were then selected for the main study and modified depending on their ability in the pilot study context to elicit young children's perspectives as well as address the research questions.

**Main study.** The main study comprised three phases of data collection over a 9- to 11-month period to capture children's experiences of program participation, as well as their perceptions of family change over time. A multi-phased study provided the researcher with

more opportunities for prolonged engagement with the programs and the children in order to gain an in depth understanding of the children's experiences of participation in the programs and their everyday home life.

**Phase 1.** The data gathered during Phase 1 formed the baseline or 'starting point' of the children's experiences of participation in the programs and of their everyday home life. The researcher spent two days per week for four to six weeks at each research site during Phase 1.

**Phase 2.** The second phase of the research was conducted approximately three to four months after Phase 1. The same methods and data gathering activities designed to capture children's experiences of program participation and everyday home life were used during this phase to build on the data gathered during Phase 1.

**Phase 3.** The final phase of the research occurred approximately three to four months after Phase 2 (and six to seven months after Phase 1). As with the preceding phases, the same methods and data gathering activities were completed with the children. The data gathered during Phases 2 and 3 was considered the 'change' data. It was anticipated that from this data, the researcher would be able to identify differences in the way children perceived their everyday home life and changes that may have occurred in their family over the course of program participation.

### **Participants**

All children between the ages of 3 to 5 years who attended the research sites were invited to participate in the research. Table 4.3 provides an overview of the number of participants in each program and their ages.



Table 4.3

*Child Participants by Program and Age*

	Parenting Program	Supported Playgroup	Preschool
N	5	3	10
Male	4	0	5
Female	1	3	5
Age in years			
<i>M (SD)</i>	3.86 (0.58)	4.12 (0.51)	4.57 (0.46)
Range	3.36-4.81	3.54-4.51	3.56-5.06

*Note:* Four children were initially recruited from the supported playgroup. One child ceased attending the program during the early stages of Phase 1.

As identified in Table 4.3, children who attended the parenting program were on average the youngest group of participants. The one girl from the parenting program was also the oldest (4.81 years) for this group of children. No boys were recruited from the supported playgroup. The preschool children comprised the largest sample (10 children) and were also, on average, the oldest group of participants. Throughout this thesis, pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participating children and their families.

### **Profile of Families**

Mothers completed a demographic survey at Phase 1 (see Appendix 4). The survey collected basic demographic data, including age of mother, cultural background, level of mother's education, and family composition. A basic profile of children's families was compiled for each of the three programs (see Table 4.4). Demographic information is presented for all families of participant children attending the parenting program (five families) and the supported playgroup (three families). While 10 children from the preschool participated in the research, demographic information is provided for only eight families. One

family from the preschool sample did not complete the survey and another preschool family had two children involved in the research. Information for this family is presented only once.

As shown in Table 4.4, parenting program mothers were, on average, younger and had lower levels of education than supported playgroup and preschool mothers. Two of the five parenting program children were from families where the parents had separated. These two children had little, if any, contact with their fathers. One child from the preschool was from a family in which the parents had separated however by Phase 2 of the research, the parents had reunited. Parenting program families lived in relatively more disadvantaged suburbs compared to supported playgroup and preschool families. Three of the five parenting program families lived in suburbs ranked between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> most disadvantaged suburbs in New South Wales, with their SEIFA scores being in the lowest 1% of areas in the state (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

Table 4.4

*Demographic Profile of Families of Participant Children*

	Parenting Program	Supported Playgroup	Preschool
N	5	3 <sup>a</sup>	8
Mother's age in years <i>M</i> (Range)	28.6 (23-33)	37.0 (32-42)	38.5 (31-43)
Country of birth (n)			
Australia	4	2	8
Other	1 (Canadian)	1 (Sri Lankan)	-
ATSI <sup>b</sup> (n)	1	1	-
Educational attainment (n)			
Completed Year 8	1	-	-
Completed Year 10	-	-	-
Completed Year 12	1	-	-
TAFE/ Vocational	2	2	3
Undergraduate	1	-	4
Postgraduate	-	1	1
Language spoken at home (n)			-
English only	4	1	7
Mostly English	1 (Tongan)	1 (Filipino)	1 (Vietnamese)
Mostly another language	-	1 (Singhalese)	-
Family composition (n)			
Two-parent family	3	3	7
Single-parent family	2	-	1
Number of children living in the house <sup>c</sup> <i>M</i> (Range)	3.2 (2-5)	2.7 (2-4)	2.9 (2-4)
Sibling age in years <i>M</i> (Range)	5.8 (0.9-12.5)	7.0 (0.6-10.3)	7.0 (0.5-15.0)
Suburb SEIFA <sup>d</sup> Range	623-1042	920-922	1018-1066

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>During Phase 1, three children were recruited from the supported playgroup. Following Phase 1, one child (Rosie) ceased attending the supported playgroup. Hence, during Phases 2 and 3, qualitative data is only reported for two children (Catherine and Gemma). <sup>b</sup>ATSI = Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. <sup>c</sup>Number of children living in the house represents the number of children (identified by the mother as siblings) including the participant child living in the family home. It is important to note that for some parenting program families, some children were not included in this number as they were in out-of-home care (foster care). <sup>d</sup>SEIFA = Socio-Economic Index for Areas; a lower score indicates that an area is relatively disadvantaged compared to an area with a higher score ( $M=1000$ ,  $SD=100$ ) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

## **Recruitment**

The researcher attended several meetings with the Directors and key staff members (Program Coordinators and Play Facilitators) from each of the programs to explain the study, answer questions and discuss recruitment strategies. Prior to recruitment, the researcher also provided an information session for families at the parenting program and the supported playgroup. During these sessions, the study was described and an information and consent package provided to the parents (see Appendix 5). The Program Coordinator (or Play Facilitator) from the parenting program and the supported playgroup also provided a prepared package of information to any families with children aged 3- to 5-years-old who were not able to attend the information sessions. As well as complying with university research ethics requirements, these procedures met the standard protocol employed by the programs in relation to keeping staff and families informed about activities taking place onsite and were seen as an inclusive way of addressing parental concerns.

Parents were assured that participation by their child was voluntary and that they did not need to provide a reason for non-participation. Parents were asked to talk with their children about the research before providing consent for them to participate. By providing their consent, parents were also aware that they would be asked to complete a number of surveys during the study. Parents were not required to return consent forms 'on the spot' or directly to the researcher. Rather, parents were provided with sealed envelopes in which they could return their completed consent forms to a sealed box at each program, thus minimising any pressure on them to participate. Some parents chose to return their consent form directly to the Program Coordinators.

Following discussions with the Director of the preschool, a slightly different recruitment strategy was employed for the preschool. The researcher placed a prepared information package (information sheet and consent form) into the 'parent pockets' at the

preschool. These pockets are similar to individual pigeon holes for each child and are used by the preschool staff to provide important information and communication material to parents. Parents were provided with a contact phone number and email address and asked to contact the researcher if they had any questions or concerns about the study. The preschool Director and staff were also available to answer any questions about the study. As with the other research sites, a sealed box was provided at the preschool for parents to return their signed consent forms although some parents chose to return their consent forms to either the Director or a staff member.

Children were only approached to participate in the research after their parents had provided consent for them to participate. Following parental consent, the researcher spoke with each child about the study and asked whether they would like to participate. All children approached in this way agreed to take part. Children were then provided with their own consent form to make their 'special mark' on or write their name (see Appendix 2). The procedure for gaining consent from the children has been discussed in the Ethical Considerations section of this chapter.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Several data collection methods were used during the project and these are presented in Tables 4.5 and 4.6.

Table 4.5

*Data Collection Methods Addressing Research Question 1*

Construct	Data collection methods	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Child descriptions of program participation	Child-led photography	✓	✓	✓
	Child interviews	✓	✓	✓
	Researcher observations	✓	✓	✓
Social relationships and peer interactions	BDI-2 Personal-Social Domain Screening Test	✓		
	BDI-2 Peer Interaction Scale	✓	✓	✓
Mothers' reports of children's program participation	Mother-completed program participation survey	✓		✓

*Note.* BDI-2 is the abbreviation for the Battelle Developmental Inventory (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Newborg, 2005).

The data collection methods outlined in Table 4.5 addressed the first research question: *How do young children experience and describe program participation, and does this change over time?* These data collection methods also addressed the two sub-questions:

- *Is there a difference between the three programs in the quality of children's peer interactions, and does the quality of peer interactions change over time during program participation?*
- *How do mothers perceive their children's program participation, and does this change over time?*

Results associated with this research question are presented in Chapter 5.

Table 4.6

*Data Collection Methods Addressing Research Question 2*

Construct	Data collection method	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Life events	Mother-completed survey	✓		✓
Home environment	HSQ <sup>a</sup>	✓		✓
Child descriptions of everyday home and family life	Ecocultural child interview	✓	✓	✓
Attachment representations	ASCT <sup>b</sup>	✓		✓
Children's receptive language development	PPVT-4 <sup>c</sup>		✓	

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>HSQ is the abbreviation for the Home Screening Questionnaire (Coons, Gay, Fandal, Ker, & Frankenburg, 1981). <sup>b</sup>ASCT is the abbreviation for the Attachment Story Completion Task (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990). <sup>c</sup>PPVT-4 is the abbreviation for the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (4<sup>th</sup> edition) (Dunn & Dunn, 2007)

The data collection methods presented in Table 4.6 addressed the second research question: *How do young children perceive everyday home and family life during program participation, and does this change over time?* Results associated with this research question are presented in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7.

As outlined in Tables 4.5 and 4.6, some data collection methods were completed at every phase of the research while others were completed during Phases 1 and 3 or at one time point only. The use of methods at different phases depended on the reason for inclusion of that particular method. The rationale for this is detailed in the section related to each data collection method.

### **Data Collection Methods: Research Question 1 (Program Participation)**

This section provides a detailed description of the data collection methods that informed an understanding of children's experiences and descriptions of program

participation. In addition, data was collected that addressed the sub-questions related to program participation. Quantitative data was collected on children's peer interactions within the program context to answer the question: *Is there a difference between the three programs in the quality of children's peer interactions, and does the quality of peer interactions change over time during program participation?* Mothers' reports of their children's program participation were also collected to address the question: *How do mothers perceive their children's program participation, and does this change over time?*

**Children's descriptions of program participation.** The three data collection methods (child-led photography, child interviews, and researcher observations) adapted from the Mosaic approach were completed at every phase of the research in order to capture any change over time in children's descriptions of program participation. The data collected using the following activities were audio-recorded, transcribed and then analysed thematically.

***Child-led photography.*** Child-led photography was considered to be an accessible data gathering activity for all children involved in the research. The aim of this activity was for children to communicate their perspectives and preferences using a creative and visual tool that also prompted discussion about children's experiences of the program they attended.

Each child was provided with a digital camera during a morning session at the program they attended. Following an initial demonstration on how to use the digital camera, the researcher invited each child to photograph what was important to them at the program or what they wanted to show other children about the program such as objects, places, toys, activities or people.

The researcher walked around with each child as they were taking photographs and reviewed the photographs 'on the spot' with them using the built-in camera screen. During this initial review, the researcher and child discussed the photographs (see Appendix 6 for



photograph discussion prompts). The researcher was interested in knowing from the child's perspective what the photograph was of, what children liked about the photograph, and whether the photograph captured something important to them at the program. This initial review also limited the period of time between the photograph being taken and subsequent discussion of the photograph. Previous research (see Baird, 2013; Clark, 2010a) has suggested that shorter time lapses between these activities demonstrate more benefits in helping children recall and talk about their photographs. Following this initial review, the photographs were uploaded onto a laptop computer. During the researcher's next visit to the program, each child reviewed and discussed the photographs again with the researcher. The researcher used the above-mentioned discussion prompts to facilitate this review process with the children. The researcher followed the lead of the children during these reviews, remaining responsive to any issues raised by the children.

***Child interviews.*** Children were also invited to participate in a short semi-structured interview based on key issues including what sorts of things they did at the program, the role of adults at the program, and their favourite and least favourite activities (see Appendix 6). The interview schedule was based on the schedule developed by Clark and Moss (2009) which has been used in other early childhood research informed by the Mosaic approach, including the pilot study. Children chose to participate in the interviews individually or in small groups of two or three children. While the term 'interview' has been used, the interviews were more like an informal conversation between the researcher and child. To facilitate a shift in the power imbalance between the adult researcher and the child participant, the children were also given the choice of location. These conversations took place wherever the children happened to be and often occurred 'on the move' to allow them to play and talk at the same time. The interviews were used to reinforce the understandings gained by other data collection activities and to address any unclear issues.

***Researcher observations.*** Observations were completed at several stages of the research and recorded as field notes. As recommended by Clark (2010a) in relation to the Mosaic approach, at the beginning of Phase 1 the researcher engaged in observations which focused on the key question: What does it mean to be in this place? These observations provided narrative or story-form ‘snap shots’ of the program and its routine as well as of the study children. The initial observations served several purposes, including allowing the researcher to ‘get a feel’ for the programs while not being actively involved, providing prompts for further discussion with the children, and contributing additional contextual information.

Following the observations, the researcher directly engaged with the children in their day-to-day activities at the programs. In doing so, the researcher was able to position herself as the ‘authentic novice’ or as an adult who was genuinely interested in finding out about what it was like to attend the program (Clark, 2010a; Clark & Moss, 2005; Greenfield, 2011). During this time the researcher continued to observe the children with observations informing the interviews as well as interpretation of what the children said and did. Participant observation as a tool for learning about children’s perspectives has been used effectively in other early childhood research (Clark & Moss, 2009; Corsaro & Molinari, 2008; Warming, 2005). While observations alone may not tell a complete or accurate story, the disadvantages of observation as a discrete measure are lessened in the Mosaic approach as it can be used to triangulate the data that has been gathered through a range of methods.

Researcher observations were transcribed and analysed thematically alongside the data collected during the child-led photography activity and the child interviews. Researcher observations have been used in Chapter 5 to provide supporting detail to the children’s descriptions of program participation, and to clarify differences between the three groups of children (e.g., researcher observations were used to illustrate differences between parenting

program and preschool children's peer interactions within the program context). Observations have also been included in Chapter 8 as part of the researcher's reflections on the research process.

**Social relationships and peer interactions.** Children's social relationships and peer interactions were of interest to the current study as parenting program staff worked directly with children to support positive social skills development at the program (Mondy & Mondy, 2008b). Children's participation in the parenting program also included the opportunity to engage in social play with peers during the morning session while mothers attended the therapeutic support group. Further, research evidence supports the association between the quality of children's early attachment relationships and the quality of their subsequent interpersonal relationships and social interactions (Pallini, Baiocco, Schneider, Madigan, & Atkinson, 2014). Due to the focus of the parenting program, it was likely that many of the children had experienced difficult early attachment relationships impacting potentially on their abilities to interact positively with peers. The following researcher-completed standardised observation measures were included as a means of documenting the differences in peer interactions and assessing whether the quality of these interactions changed over the course of program participation.

***Personal-Social Domain of the Battelle Developmental Inventory (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (BDI-2) Screening Test.*** The BDI-2 Screening Test Personal-Social (P-S) Domain (Newborg, 2005) was selected and completed as a one-off measure at the completion of Phase 1 to provide an indication of children's abilities to engage in meaningful social interactions with both peers and adults. This observation-based, researcher-completed measure was to gather supplementary information about the differences in social interactions between the three groups of children and not as a definitive measure of the children's personal and social functioning.

The BDI-2 Screening Test is an abbreviated version of the full BDI-2 and is often used for initial assessments with children up to age 8 to gauge whether administration of one or more domains of the full BDI-2 is necessary. The Personal-Social Domain of the BDI-2 Screening Test contains 20 items and provides a brief assessment of a child's behaviours and abilities related to adult interaction (e.g., 'responds positively when familiar adults or adults in authority initiate social contact'), peer interaction (e.g., 'initiates social contact with peers in play'), and self-concept and social role (e.g., 'engages in adult role-playing and imitation'). Each item is given a score of 2 (child typically performs behaviour at least 90% of the time); 1 (child sometimes performs behaviour); or 0 (child rarely or never performs behaviour). Items are administered between a child's basal level, the functional level at which the child shows mastery of a task or behaviour (the child scores 2 on three consecutive items) and ceiling level, the level at which a child is no longer able to perform the task or behaviour with mastery (the child scores 0 on three consecutive items).

Most of the items in the Screening Test use observation procedures and as such were easily completed by the researcher at the conclusion of Phase 1. However, two items related to self-concept and social role needed to be administered through structured procedures. The first item, 'states his or her first and last names' (at a 5-year-old level) was able to be scored by the researcher on the basis of initial introductory conversations in which the children were asked their first and last names. The second item, 'discriminates between socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour' (6- and 7-year-old level) was not tested. Children who had not yet reached their ceiling level in the Screening Test (a score of 0 on three consecutive highest-numbered items) were given a score of 0 for this item.

For data analysis purposes, each child's raw score was compared to the Screening Test Personal-Social Domain cut-off scores relevant to their chronological age, in accordance with the BDI-2 Examiner's Manual (Newborg, 2005). Cut-off scores represented  $-1.0 SD$ ,  $-1.5 SD$ ,

or -2.0 *SD* below the mean for that particular domain. If the child's raw score was higher than all the cut-off scores, they received a pass as an indication of age-appropriate personal-social development.

***Peer Interaction Scale of the Battelle Developmental Inventory (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (BDI-2).*** The Peer Interaction Scale (PI) of the BDI-2 (Newborg, 2005) was completed by the researcher at each phase of the study. The inclusion of this measure repeated over the three research phases provided a systematic framework for identifying whether the quality of children's interactions with peers changed over their time in the program.

The PI is a subdomain of the full BDI-2 and contains 25 items that assess the quality and frequency of a child's interaction with their peers, including forming friendships (e.g., 'the child expresses affection or liking for a peer'), responding to and initiating social contact (e.g., 'initiates social contacts and interactions with peers'), and their ability to successfully interact in small groups and cooperate with other children (e.g., 'plays cooperatively with peers') (Newborg, 2005). The PI is scored identically to the Screening Test mentioned previously with children being given a score of 2, 1, or 0 for each test item. For the purposes of this research, the PI was also completed based on researcher observations.

Each child's PI raw score was converted to a scaled score equivalent in accordance with the BDI-2 Examiner's Manual (Newborg, 2005). As the scaled scores were normalised standard scores ( $M = 10$ ,  $SD = 3$ ), these were able to be used in the quantitative data analysis to document differences in peer interaction between the three groups as well as change over time in social interactions within the program context.

**Mothers' reports of children's program participation.** In keeping with the Mosaic approach, mothers' perspectives on their children's program participation were also sought to build a comprehensive picture. A brief researcher-developed survey of mothers' reports on

their children's program participation was completed by mothers at Phases 1 and 3. The full survey is presented in Appendix 7. The data collected in this survey aimed to provide information on what mothers liked about their children's participation in the programs, thus enabling some comparison between mothers' and children's perspectives of program participation. Further, as mothers completed this survey at two research phases, any changes in their reports of their children's program participation could be identified.

Each mother was required to rate 10 statements (beginning with the phrase 'I like my child coming to [program name] because ...') about their child's participation at the program on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with 1 being strongly disagree, 3 being neutral, and 5 being strongly agree. These statements were divided into two groups (or scales): social interaction, and play and learning experiences. Four statements focused on children's social interaction with other children, program staff, and parents (e.g., 'I like my child coming to [program name] because of the social interaction they have with other children'). Six statements centred on children's play (e.g., 'I like my child coming to [program name] because they get to do messy play') and learning experiences (e.g., 'I like my child coming to [program name] because of the development or early learning activities').

The total score given by each mother to the social interaction scale (minimum score of 4, maximum score of 20) and the play and learning experiences scale (minimum score of 6, maximum score of 30) at Phases 1 and 3 was used in the quantitative analysis.

### **Data Collection Methods: Research Question 2 (Everyday Home and Family Life)**

This section provides a detailed description of the data collection methods used to gather children's perspectives on everyday home and family life, including parent-child attachment. These methods were designed to capture any changes in children's perspectives

over the three phases of research. Information related to the home environments of the families was also collected from the mothers.

**Life events.** Mothers completed a survey at Phases 1 and 3 about major life events (see Appendix 8 for survey). This data was collected as a brief measure of the number of major life events experienced by mothers (or the family) within the previous 12 months and during program participation. This measure provided contextual information and an indication of change within mothers' lives during program involvement, particularly in terms of whether their lives became more stable over time.

**Home environment.** Mothers completed the Home Screening Questionnaire (HSQ) (Coons et al., 1981) for 3- to 6-year-old children at Phases 1 and 3. In the current research, the HSQ was used to provide further contextual information from that gathered from the children, and to gain some insight into aspects of the home environment that may have changed during program participation. As direct home observations may have been intrusive for some families, the HSQ provided an acceptable alternative to the home visits that would have been required when using the alternative measure, the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment Inventory (HOME; Caldwell & Bradley, 1978; 1984).

The HSQ is parent-completed and screens the home environment for factors related to a young child's growth and development, including organisation of the home, parental involvement, variety of stimulation, and play materials. Items for the HSQ have been based on the HOME Inventory. The internal consistency coefficient is .80 and the test-retest reliability coefficient is .86 for the 3-6 HSQ (Coons et al., 1981). When compared to the full HOME Inventory, Coons et al (1981) found the 3-6 HSQ accurately identified 66% of children whose HOME scores would also be low. This abbreviated assessment works as a

screening instrument of young children's home environments, and not as an evaluation or diagnostic tool.

The HSQ includes 34 items consisting of multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and yes/no responses, as well as a toy checklist (parents check all of the toys that are available for the child to play with in the home environment). Items are scored in accordance to those that contribute positively to a child's development with most items only receiving a score of 1. For some other items, a total score of 2, 3 or 6 is possible depending on the responses provided. For example, item 18 ('Check the things which you (or another adult or older child) are helping or have helped your child to learn: a) colours; b) alphabet; c) numbers; d) understanding of time; e) shapes; f) reading new words or writing his/her name') can receive a total score of 6 if a parent has checked the six options provided. The total score for the HSQ is the sum of the questionnaire and toy checklist (the total possible score being 56). A score of 41 or below indicates a possible risk of developmental delay for the child due to adverse environmental factors. In the current research, descriptive statistics of the HSQ results are used to provide an indication of the differences that might exist in the home environments of children from the three programs.

**Child descriptions of everyday home and family life.** An ecocultural child interview (Grace & Bowes, 2009) was used to understand how children described and perceived their everyday home and family life through exploring their family's daily routines. Children participated in the ecocultural interview at each of the three research phases as a way of capturing any changes they may have described in their everyday home and family life during program participation. Ecocultural theory is highly consistent with script theory which "provides evidence that young children's event knowledge is organised around the structure of routine, daily activities" (Wiltz & Klein, 2001, p. 212). Thus, if changes occurred during



program involvement, children were likely to experience these as concrete, noticeable changes or differences in their family's daily routines.

The ecocultural interview aimed to explore the five components or variables that constitute the family activity settings identified by Gallimore et al. (1989). These components include the people (participants) involved in an activity, the values and goals of those present (the deeper, underlying values and goals of the people involved), the tasks of the activity being performed, the purposes or motives of the participants and their engagement in the activity, and the scripts that govern the participants' actions including the language and the sort of words that are used (Weisner, 2002).

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the ecocultural child interview was not structured around the 10 dimensions of family life. Rather, a number of dimensions were considered as a priori constructs (e.g., Domestic Workload, Connectedness, Services, Structure of the Home Environment, and Friendship Networks) after taking into consideration findings from previous research that had used an ecocultural child interview (Grace et al., 2011). The interview was semi-structured with open-ended questions that focused on key family activity settings or activities that made up a child's daily routine (Gallimore et al., 1993) such as getting up in the morning ('What happens when you get up in the morning?'), eating dinner ('What sorts of things do people say when you are eating dinner?'), and playtime ('Who do you play with at home?') (see Appendix 9 for full set of questions). Most children chose to participate in the interview individually although over the three phases of research six preschool children participated in small friendship groups of two or three children. The ecocultural interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically.

**Children's receptive language development.** Following the pilot study, it was anticipated that some children may have communication difficulties or that there would be

considerable variability evident in their language ability. While children were not selected for the research based on language skills, it was considered important to have an index of their development in this area. This was to provide some indication of the children's ability to understand and complete the data collection activities. Further, a child's vocabulary knowledge has been considered a potential control variable in other research studies that have used story stem completion tasks (for example, Stronach et al., 2011; Toth, Cicchetti, MacFie, Maughan, & Vanmeenen, 2000; Trapolini, Ungererand, & McMahon, 2007).

In the current research, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (4<sup>th</sup> edition) (PPVT-4; Dunn & Dunn, 2007) was used to assess the children's receptive vocabulary. The PPVT-4 was administered during the second research phase using the standard format of the researcher orally presenting a stimulus word with a set of pictures and the child asked to select the picture that best represents the word's meaning. Following completion of the PPVT-4, the child's raw score was calculated and then converted to a standard score as recommended in the PPVT-4 Manual (Dunn & Dunn, 2007). The standard score was used as a control variable in the quantitative analysis of the Attachment Story Completion Task.

**Attachment representations.** An aim of the current research was to explore children's narrative representations of their attachment relationships with their parents particularly as the theoretical underpinning of the parenting program was attachment theory. As such, a specific attachment-based story stem measure then used in the pilot study was deemed more appropriate for inclusion in the main study. While the MSSB (Bretherton & Oppenheim, 2003) used in the pilot study incorporates attachment, moral, and competence themes, the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT) (Bretherton et al., 1990) was selected for the main study as it focuses solely on attachment themes.

The ASCT is a projective story stem measure that elicits young children's narrative representations of their attachment relationships with their parents (Bretherton et al., 1990). In the current research, the ASCT was used as a way of documenting change in the young children's narrative attachment representations over the research period as children were assessed during Phase 1 and then again during Phase 3. The decision to complete the ASCT at these two time points was also based on the administration timing of the ASCT (twice over a 12-month period) in previous research studies that have examined changes in maltreated young children's narrative representations (Hodges, Steele, Hillman, Henderson, & Kaniuk, 2003; Toth et al., 2000).

The ASCT included a warm-up story about a birthday party and five attachment-related story stems (see Appendix 10 for story stems). The story stems depicted mildly stressful events that might occur in daily family life such as a child spilling juice or parents leaving for an over-night trip. Particular attachment issues or themes are addressed in each of the stories, including pain as an elicitor of attachment and protective behaviour, separation anxiety and coping, and responses to parental return (reunion quality) (Bretherton et al., 1990). The stories and their corresponding attachment themes are presented in Table 4.7. The ASCT was administered using the standard format of presenting a story stem to a child with doll props and then saying 'Show me and tell me what happens next.' In the current research, toy family figures (mother, father, grandmother, boy, and girl) and props (such as a table, chairs, bed, juice jug and car) were used as specified in the ASCT manual. The ASCT was video-recorded for each child and transcribed verbatim (including detailed descriptions of the children's actions).

Table 4.7

*Story Stems and Attachment-related Themes from the ASCT<sup>a</sup>*

Story stem	Attachment-related theme
Spilled juice story	Attachment figure in an authority role
Hurt knee story	Pain as an elicitor of attachment and protective behaviour
Monster in the bedroom story	Fear as an elicitor of attachment and protective behaviour
Departure story	Separation anxiety and coping
Reunion story	Responses to parental return

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> Bretherton et al. (1990).

The children's story stem narratives were coded using the two-step coding system developed by Page (2007) (see Appendix 11 for coding system). This coding system comprises level I content codes and level II process scales. The 16 level I content codes include dyadic interactions (e.g., parent nurture, and child-parent role reversal) and individual attributes (e.g., child autonomous behaviour). The three level II process scales were created to reflect the major behavioural systems (attachment, caregiving, and exploration/sociability) conceptualised by Bowlby during the development of attachment theory (Page, 2007).

According to Page (2007), the attachment system scale is characterised by representations of the attachment behaviour activation cycle (direct expressions of attachment behaviour, sensitive parental responses, and indication of re-regulation following activation). The caregiving scale is represented predominately by parent-child role behaviour and boundaries, reflecting a child's overall sense of safety, protection, and care (Page, 2007). The exploration/sociability scale is represented by mastery/mutuality (appropriately regulated exploration, individual competence, and positive social interactions with other children)

versus vulnerability/incompetence (fear or incompetence in relation to exploration and/or conflict with other children) (Page, 2007).

During initial coding, the video of each child's ASCT was viewed and level I content codes were recorded on the transcript. Level I content codes were applied to each story stem as often as they occurred using an intensity rating scale (3-point scale, with 2 as the mid-level rating default). During this time, each story stem was also coded for overall story coherence (a coherent story addressed the attachment issue directly, and provided a positive, logical and compact story resolution) and avoidance of story elements (quantity of story stem response, directness of response to the story problem, and emotional engagement with the examiner).

Following level I coding, a rating for each of the three level II process scales (attachment, caregiving, and exploration/sociability) was given to each child based on the story themes identified and the collective impression of the quality of the process scale constructs present across all story stems. The rating was on a 7-point scale. A rating of 1 reflected predominant representations of the negative dimensions of the process scales (e.g., a rating of 1 on the caregiving scale would reflect representations of primarily hostile, frightening, and neglectful parenting, as well as role-reversal, and incoherence). A rating of 7 reflected representations that primarily encompassed positive dimensions of the process scales (e.g., a rating of 7 on the caregiving scale would reflect representations of positive, caring, authoritative discipline and guidance as well as appropriate parent-child boundaries). A rating of 4 was considered to be the mid-point rating or was awarded when no representations of any codes that compose level II process scales were present. The ratings for each of the level II process scales were used in the data analysis.

During initial coding, the researcher and one of her doctoral supervisors dual coded two children's complete story stem narratives using the coding system developed by Page

(2007). Following this, the researcher independently coded all transcripts. The doctoral supervisor then independently coded six of these transcripts (approximately 20%). Interrater agreement was considered within one point on level II scale scores. Interrater agreement was 80% for attachment scale scores, 80% for caregiving scale scores, and 80% for exploration/sociability scale scores. For one of the six transcripts, there was more than one point difference on all scales. In this situation, the recording of the ASCT was reviewed jointly, the transcript examined, and final scores were agreed upon.

### **Approach to Data Analysis**

This section discusses the approaches used in the qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Data was initially examined and analysed separately for each group of children (parenting program, supported playgroup, and preschool). This was followed by an integrative analysis that enabled comparisons to be made across the three programs.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to examine children's descriptions of program participation, as well as of everyday home and family life. Verbatim interview transcripts (program participation interviews, including child-led photography discussions and ecocultural child interview) and researcher observations (as field notes) were imported into NVivo 9 (QSR International, 2010), a qualitative software program that assists researchers to manage, code and analyse data. During initial coding, the researcher and one of her doctoral supervisors dual coded two of the children's interviews before independently coding a further three interviews. Further discussion based on the coded children's interviews resulted in a coding framework being established (see Appendix 12 for coding framework established for program participation interviews and Appendix 13 for coding framework established for ecocultural child interviews). During the remaining coding completed by the researcher, the researcher and doctoral supervisor maintained regular communication and any issues or

confusion in relation to coding the children's interview data was discussed until consensus was reached.

In the initial coding of the data, nodes were created to serve as 'dropping-off points' (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013) as a means of grouping together similar ideas or concepts from the data. To ensure consistency between the analysis (and reporting) of program participation data and home and family life data, these nodes were based on relevant ecocultural dimensions which served as a priori constructs or overarching themes (Services, Support, and Friendship Networks for program participation data, and Domestic Workload, Connectedness, Structure of the Home Environment, and Friendship Networks for everyday home and family life interview data). The deductive analysis approach was useful in focusing on children's responses to interview questions as a means of providing an overall sense of how children from the three programs described program participation and everyday home and family life. The nodes were then divided into key themes or concepts that represented the qualitative data within each ecocultural dimension. An inductive analysis process was used to identify additional and unanticipated themes that emerged from the children's interviews as well as any children's descriptions that were divergent or exceptional. These themes also fell within ecocultural dimensions that were not considered as a priori constructs such as Diversity. This process provided a picture of children's descriptions and experiences of program participation and everyday home and family life. In addition, as the current research involved identifying changes in children's descriptions, Phase 1 data was coded first to create baseline data. Data from Phases 2 and 3 were then coded separately with the key themes from Phase 1 being used as a starting point for initial coding with additional themes being identified as coding progressed.

Bazeley's (2009) three-step formula, 'describe, compare, relate' was used during analysis and in reporting of the data. These three steps guided the analytic writing of the

findings from the qualitative data. First, the study's context and data sources were reviewed briefly before the characteristics and boundaries of the themes (e.g., How did children talk about particular aspects of a theme and how many talked about it?) were described for each group of children. Differences in the characteristics of each theme were then compared across the three groups of children (e.g., Did themes occur more or less often for the different groups of children? Is a theme expressed differently by the different groups of children?). Lastly, themes were then related to each other, particularly in relation to examining whether children's descriptions changed over time (e.g., Was there a pattern in this theme across the three phases of research? What was it that made one group of children different from another in relation to a particular theme?)

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows (version 20.0) (IBM Corp., 2011) was used to analyse results for the BDI-2 Peer Interaction Scale, mother-completed program participation survey, ASCT, and the PPVT-4. All quantitative data was initially examined using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and medians). Due to the small sample sizes in each group, non-parametric statistical tests were used to explore differences between and within the three groups of children and across the three research phases. For the same reason, the level of significance reported in the results was the exact significance rather than the asymptotic significance which assumes a large data set. Table 4.8 outlines the non-parametric statistical tests and post-hoc analysis performed on each quantitative measure.



Table 4.8

*Non-Parametric Statistical Tests Used for Analysis of Quantitative Measures*

Measure	Differences between groups (Post-hoc analysis <sup>a</sup> )	Change over time within groups (Post-hoc analysis <sup>a</sup> )
BDI-2 Peer Interaction Scale	Kruskal-Wallis (Mann-Whitney U)	Friedman
Program participation survey (mother)	Kruskal-Wallis	Wilcoxon Signed Ranks
ASCT	Kruskal-Wallis (Mann-Whitney U)	Wilcoxon Signed Ranks
PPVT	Kruskal-Wallis	

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> During post-hoc analysis, a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons was made.

As shown in Table 4.8 Kruskal-Wallis tests were conducted for each measure to determine if statistically significant differences existed between the three groups of children. Pairwise comparisons were made using Mann-Whitney U tests when significant differences were found. To test for change over time within each group of children, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks tests were performed for measures that were completed at two research phases while Friedman tests were conducted on the children's BDI-2 Peer Interaction Scale as this measure was completed at three research phases.

### Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the design and methodology of the current study. The research adopted a longitudinal, mixed-method design with three phases of data collection over a 9 to 11 month period. Data was gathered from multiple sources and perspectives over the research period to provide an in-depth picture of children's program participation and everyday home and family life. Furthermore, the approaches to data analysis ensured the experiences of children from each program (parenting program, supported playgroup, and preschool) were able to be compared with each other while remaining sensitive to individual children's

perspectives. Ethical issues that arise from conducting research with young children were identified and the procedures taken to address these in the current research were discussed.

The results in relation to children's program participation will be presented in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5

### RESULTS: LIFE AT THE PROGRAM

#### CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

This chapter addresses the first research question: *How do young children experience and describe program participation, and does this change over time?* In this chapter, child descriptions of program participation and any changes to these descriptions during participation are presented. The children's descriptions were gathered using data collection activities from the Mosaic approach. It was expected that parenting program children's experiences of program participation would change over time, particularly in relation to aspects of the program aimed at supporting children (e.g., making friends with peers or developing relationships with staff at the program) and the parent-child relationship (e.g., parent-child play at the program).

The chapter also addresses two additional questions in relation to life at the program. The first: *Is there a difference between the three programs in the quality of children's peer interactions, and does the quality of peer interactions change over time during program participation?* Social relationships and interactions with peers were examined as parenting program staff explicitly supported children's positive social skills development at the program. Differences in peer interactions were explored as children also spent considerable time with other children in each of the program contexts. This question was answered using the results from two researcher-completed standardised observation measures from the Battelle Developmental Inventory (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). It was anticipated that the quality of peer interactions for parenting program children, more so than supported playgroup and preschool children, would reflect some positive change during program involvement due to the efforts of parenting program staff to support children's social development.

The second question asked: *How do mothers perceive their children's program participation, and does this change over time?* Mothers' reports of children's program participation were collected using a mother-completed survey and their responses enabled comparison between mothers' and children's views of some aspects of program participation (i.e., play experiences and social interactions).

### **Children's Descriptions of Program Participation**

As explained in Chapter 4, the current research examined children's experiences of three different program types: a parenting program; a supported playgroup; and preschool. The parenting program was an attachment-based, intensive, therapeutic child protection and parenting education program attended by mothers and their young children. Play and early learning activities were provided for children by Play Facilitators. The supported playgroup (comparison group) was attended by parents and their young children. While less intensive and more universally accessed than the parenting program, the supported playgroup also offered parenting information and support. Early childhood learning and play opportunities were provided for children by trained early childhood workers at the supported playgroup. The preschool (comparison group) offered a play-based early education and care program, and was attended by children 3- to 6-years-old (parents did not remain for the program).

At Phase 1 parenting program children had been attending the program for the shortest amount of time ( $M = 0.77$  years,  $SD = 0.28$ ) compared to the comparison groups of children attending a supported playgroup ( $M = 2.75$  years,  $SD = 0.95$ ), and children attending preschool ( $M = 1.45$  years,  $SD = 0.80$ ). The number of days per week children attended the programs was comparable across the three groups. On average, regardless of program type, children attended approximately two days per week. However, the amount of time per day children spent at each program differed. Children spent approximately four hours per day at the parenting program, two hours per day at the supported playgroup, and six to eight hours

per day at the preschool. Parenting program children, on average, were the youngest ( $M = 3.86$  years,  $SD = 0.58$ ) compared to the supported playgroup children ( $M = 4.12$  years,  $SD = 0.51$ ), and preschool children ( $M = 4.57$  years,  $SD = 0.46$ ).

This section presents the themes identified from the children's descriptions of program participation. This part of the research was guided by the Mosaic approach, and used child-led photography and conversations with the children to capture their perceptions of program participation. As outlined in Chapter 4, a semi-structured interview schedule developed by Clark and Moss (2009) was used to facilitate conversation with the children. During these conversations, children were asked about different aspects of program participation including what they did at the program, whether or not they had friends at the program, which adults helped them at the program and how, and what their favourite and least favourite activities were at the program. In addition, these conversations were complemented and extended by the discussions between the children and the researcher about the children's photographs. These conversations were flexible and responsive to any issues raised by the children and the researcher made every effort to provide children with opportunities to share their views on program participation. Throughout this section, researcher observations have been included to add supporting detail to some of the children's descriptions, and children's photographs<sup>8</sup> are presented as a visual representation of their experiences of program participation.

Interviews with the children were analysed thematically to understand the ways in which children described participation in the programs as well as the similarities and differences between the three groups of children. Themes identified during analysis are presented under the relevant ecocultural constructs and are presented in Table 5.1. As shown in the table, some themes were similar across the three groups of children, while others were raised by only one or two of the groups. These themes are discussed below for each group of

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<sup>8</sup> Consent was provided by children and parents to use their photographs.

children (parenting program, supported playgroup and preschool). Minor themes that emerged that were meaningful to some children's experiences of program participation are also presented in the table.

Table 5.1

*Themes from Children's Descriptions of Program Participation*

Parenting Program	Supported Playgroup	Preschool
Services		
Play as the best thing about the parenting program	Play as the best thing about the supported playgroup	Play as the best thing about preschool
Children come with mothers (minor theme)	Mothers play with children	Book reading (minor theme)
Friendship Networks		
Playing with a best friend (minor theme)	Playing with friends sometimes	Playing with friends lots
		Negotiating peer relationships
Support		
Mothers help children at the parenting program (minor theme)	Mothers help prepare food for children	
	Playgroup staff help children (minor theme)	Preschool staff help when children hurt themselves (minor theme)
Connectedness		
		A loved person: Feeling connected to preschool staff (minor theme)

## **Parenting Program Children's Descriptions of Program Participation**

One main theme emerged from the parenting program children's descriptions of program participation and this concerned play as the best thing about the parenting program. This fell within the Services ecocultural construct. Three minor themes were raised by some of the children and these focused on children's perceptions of mothers at the parenting program (Services and Support constructs) and friends (Friendship Network)

### **Services**

Play was an important feature of the parenting program and acknowledged as a way of "facilitating children's inner healing" (Bex, 2008, p. 213) within this program context. During the morning session, children played in the play room or outside, and in the afternoon play interactions were encouraged between mothers and children. Some children spoke also about coming to the program with their mothers.

**Play as the best thing about the parenting program.** Parenting program children spoke about playing as their favourite activity or the thing they liked best about the parenting program. This was particularly in relation to outdoor play and playing with toys.

***Outdoor play.*** At Phase 1, four of the five parenting program children spoke about outdoor play as a favourite activity. They talked about the sandpit and other play equipment such as the slides, swings, climbing frames and fixed play structures. Children also enjoyed riding the tricycles and scooters that were part of outdoor play. However, during Phases 2 and 3, fewer children (two out of five children at each phase) mentioned outdoor play. For these children the sandpit (see Figure 5.1) was their favourite thing about coming to the parenting program as expressed here by Tom: *"I like the sandpit ... playing in the sand ... building sand castles."*







*Figure 5.2.* Photograph taken by the researcher of the blue barrels Lucas enjoyed playing with at the parenting program.

**Toys.** Children from the parenting program spoke about playing with toys as another of their favourite activities while at the program. Over the course of the research, Michael consistently reported enjoying playing with the cars at the parenting program (see Figure 5.3) and Claire spoke about a variety of different toys she enjoyed playing with including the puzzles, the home corner and the doll's house.



Figure 5.3. Michael's photograph of the cars he liked playing with at the parenting program

While Tom and Lucas did not often talk about any favourite toys at the parenting program, the researcher often observed them playing (sometimes together) in the home corner or with the doll's house through all three phases of the research. During these times, Lucas' pretend play with the toys, especially those in the home corner, was gentle and involved enactments of caring, nurturing responses. For example, during Phase 2, the following observation was recorded by the researcher about Lucas playing in the home corner during a morning play session:

*Lucas was playing in the home corner with one of the toy dolls. The doll was wearing a nappy and Lucas said, "The baby has done a poo and needs to be changed." He*

*took the nappy off and wiped the doll with a cloth before putting the nappy back on. Lucas then gently put the doll into a toy cot and laid down himself on the other toy cot and pretended to go to sleep.*

Lucas and Tom also frequently engaged in violent or rough play with the toys. Lucas, in particular, spent most mornings playing games with the toy animals in which all of the animals either died or ate each other. The following observation of Lucas recorded during Phase 1 of the research highlights this kind of play:

*Lucas chose to play with the animal toys and asked me to come and play with him. We sat down on the verandah and looked through the tub of animal toys. I named some of the animals and Lucas found all the dinosaurs to play with. He jumped the dinosaurs over the other animals until they were all in the same area. The T-Rex fought with all the other dinosaurs. Lucas said, "He's killing them, he's eating them." The dinosaurs continued to fight with each other until Lucas said they were all dead. This type of play continued for about another ten or so minutes with the other animal toys.*

**Special play objects.** Certain toys or play objects were particularly special or meaningful for some children and appeared to be important aspects of their program participation. For example, Michael preferred playing with the toys at the parenting program over his own toys at home and during one conversation he mentioned, *"I don't have any cars like these [at home]."* In addition, Claire, who loved playing with teddy bears, enjoyed attending the parenting program because there were teddy bears there, and she pointed out during the photo discussion that one of the teddy bears *"looks like my teddy."*

**Children come with mothers.** This emerged as a minor theme for two of the five children. Michael spoke about attending the parenting program with his mother but was unsure of what she did while at the program. At Phase 3 Claire said, *"They go in there and*

*talk to people.*” This was in reference to the therapeutic support group the mothers attended each morning at the parenting program. In general, however, parenting program children did not particularly talk about other interactions with their mothers while at the program.

### **Friendship Networks**

This construct captured children’s experiences of friendship networks in the program context. Even though parenting program children spent considerable time with other children at the program, only one child across the research period spoke about friends.

**Playing with a best friend.** Claire was the only child from this sample who spoke about having friends at the parenting program and she often mentioned “*playing with Maggie [best friend]*” as one of the things she liked best about the program. Claire was observed to play more often with the other children (particularly her best friend and another 5-year-old girl) than alone. Claire’s focus on having a ‘best friend’ may have been a reflection of her age as she was slightly older than the other children from this sample. On several occasions the researcher observed Claire and her best friend actively excluding other children from joining in their play. This included exclusion of another 5-year-old girl Claire played with on the days her best friend did not attend the program.

The four boys from the sample did not talk about having friends at the parenting program and were mostly observed by the researcher playing alone rather than with the other children. As an example, the boys would play next to each other in the sandpit but would not talk to each other or join in each other’s games. The parenting program children were more likely to play together if a staff member facilitated this play. For example, Michael who spent most of his time playing alone played the role of shopkeeper with a group of children when helped and encouraged to do so by one of the playroom staff.

## **Support**

This construct focused on who children received help or support from at the parenting program. Some children identified their mothers as this person.

**Mothers help children at the parenting program.** This was considered a minor theme as it was not raised by all children at the parenting program. Claire and Michael identified their mothers as being the adults who helped them while they were at the program but neither of these children elaborated on the kind of help their mothers provided.

## **Summary of Parenting Program Children's Descriptions of Program Participation**

Play was a significant part of program participation for all parenting program children. This mirrored the emphasis in the literature on the importance of play for children within this context. Children particularly valued the outdoor play experiences offered at the program. Toys appeared to hold particular meaning to some of the children either because they were different from the ones they had at home or because they provided a sense of congruence between home and the program. Friendship networks were an important aspect of program participation for Claire, while mother-child interactions at the program or receiving help or support from mothers were not often reported by the parenting program children.

**Change over time in children's descriptions.** The parenting program children's descriptions of program participation were consistent from Phase 1 to Phase 3. Across this period, play remained a significant feature of children's participation in the program. Change over time did not seem to occur in relation to friendship networks, and friendships remained important to only Claire's experiences of program participation. The children's views on their engagement with their mothers within the program context (including support or help from their mothers) also showed little change.

## Supported Playgroup Children's Descriptions of Program Participation

Three main themes emerged from the supported playgroup children's descriptions of program participation. These focused on play and mothers playing with children (Services), friendships (Friendship Networks), and mothers helping at the supported playgroup (Support). Children being helped by playgroup staff (Support) also emerged as a minor theme for one of the children in the supported playgroup.

### Services

Different play opportunities were provided for children at the supported playgroup and children's enjoyment of this aspect of the program emerged as a key theme at each phase of the research. Children also perceived mothers as play partners within the program context.

**Play as the best thing about the supported playgroup.** Supported playgroup children reported playing as their favourite activity or the best thing about coming to the supported playgroup: *"I like to play [with] the toys and play the drum and play the sand"* (Catherine). Children spoke about outdoor play, playing with their favourite toys, and doing art and craft.

**Outdoor play.** At Phase 1, outdoor play was not identified as a favourite play activity for the supported playgroup children to the same extent as in later phases of the research although during Phase 1, Gemma enjoyed taking photographs of the outdoor play space and told the researcher a story about seeing birds while at the supported playgroup (see Figure 5.4). However, following a sand tray (portable sandpit) being set up at Phase 2, outdoor play was reported by Gemma and Catherine as one of the best things about the supported playgroup. Gemma said, *"I like playing outside [and] digging with the shovels"* while Catherine liked the sand tray *"...because it smells nice."*





*Figure 5.4.* Gemma’s photograph of the outdoor play area where she saw birds while attending the supported playgroup.

**Toys.** The supported playgroup children (all girls) enjoyed playing with the dolls as well as the toys in the home corner (see Figure 5.5). This was a consistent finding across the three phases of research. During their pretend play with the dolls, the researcher observed the supported playgroup children taking on nurturing and affectionate roles. This involved rocking the dolls to sleep or covering a doll with a blanket in a toy cot before placing a teddy bear beside the doll. At Phase 3, Gemma said she liked playgroup “*because the kitchen [is] my favourite side ... because I love to cook ... [and] I like the ironing [board] ... so we can iron all the dress-ups!*” During the later stages of the research, puzzles, construction blocks and toy animals were also reported as toys the supported playgroup children enjoyed playing with while at the program.



*Figure 5.5.* Catherine's photograph of a doll in the home corner at the supported playgroup.

***Special play objects.*** For some of the children, certain toys at the supported playgroup were particularly special as they did not have these toys to play with at home. This was the case for Catherine in relation to the wooden train set. Catherine mentioned she did not have a train set at home and, as such, loved setting up all the tracks. The researcher also observed Catherine spending considerable time playing with the train set each time she came to the supported playgroup.

***Art and craft.*** Art and craft activities were described by the children as another favourite thing about coming to the supported playgroup and this was consistent across the research period. During each supported playgroup session, the playgroup facilitator planned for and set up art and craft activities for the children to complete. These activities included





**Mothers play with children.** Children spoke about mothers as play partners at the supported playgroup during the second and third research phases. Gemma commented “*sometimes [parents] look after [children] by playing.*” She said that her mother and her friends’ mothers played with her in the toy kitchen. This was also voiced by Catherine in relation to her mother helping her complete puzzles: “*Mummy helps me do puzzles. Lots of puzzles.*”

However, while Gemma spoke about parents playing with their children during Phase 2, this was not always the case for her interactions with her own mother. As she observed, “*She doesn’t play with me; I play on my own.*” This was also noted by the researcher during Phases 2 and 3. When at the supported playgroup, Gemma spent time playing on her own or with other children while Gemma’s mother talked with the other parents and playgroup staff. Gemma did not seem particularly upset by this.

## **Friendship Networks**

Supported playgroup children’s experiences differed within this construct and, at times, children’s experiences depended on attendance of selected peers (e.g., favourite or best friends) at the supported playgroup.

**Playing with friends sometimes.** At Phase 1, only one child (Rosie<sup>9</sup>) from this sample reported having friends at the supported playgroup and said she “*play[ed] with the toys ... and doll’s house*” with them. During Phase 1, the researcher did not often observe the participating children playing with other children. Children tended to play close to their parents, by themselves at the various activities that had been set up, or at the same activity as other children but they rarely talked to each other or joined in each other’s games. This is illustrated in the following researcher observation from Phase 1:

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<sup>9</sup> Following Phase 1, Rosie and her mother no longer attended the supported playgroup. For this reason, Rosie’s descriptions of program participation are only in relation to Phase 1.

*The researcher and Gemma were playing with the play dough when Catherine joined the table. The children and the researcher continued to play and made little birthday cakes out of the play dough. At one stage, Catherine asked the researcher to close her eyes as she wanted to surprise the researcher with what she was making. During this time, Catherine and Gemma did not talk to each other, and only engaged in conversation with the researcher. However, the children shared the play dough between themselves.*

At Phase 2, Gemma spoke more about the friends she had at the supported playgroup and said, *“They play with me sometimes. I play in the kitchen and the doll’s house with the kids.”* She was also upset because she missed two of her friends who had not been attending the supported playgroup for the last few months. This changed at Phase 3 when one of Gemma’s friends returned and they were able to play together again. On the other hand, while Catherine said she had some friends at the supported playgroup (and occasionally played with Gemma), she spent most of her time playing with her baby brother, by herself, or with the researcher (though this may have been a reflection of her age as she was approximately one year younger than Catherine).

## **Support**

This construct encompasses supported playgroup children’s perceptions of the adults who supported or helped them as well as the types of support or help given to them by the adults. This support was mainly pragmatic and related to routine activities at the supported playgroup. All supported playgroup children saw mothers as sources of support in the program context. Staff as offering support or help emerged as a minor theme during data analysis for one child.

**Mothers help prepare food for children.** Mothers were reported by the children as the adults who helped them while they were at the supported playgroup. During Phases 1 and 3, the supported playgroup children talked about the concrete and practical tasks their mothers helped with at the supported playgroup, particularly their mothers' role in food preparation and the morning tea routine. At Phase 1, Rosie said that her mother *"cuts up food here"* in reference to her mother helping the playgroup facilitator organise the children's morning tea. Further, during Phase 3 Gemma told how her mother *"help[ed] me to remember stuff ... like to eat"* and Catherine explained *"mummy help[s] me when [I] get my lunch out."*

**Playgroup staff help children.** Gemma was the only child who viewed playgroup staff among the adults who helped her when she was at the supported playgroup. During Phase 1, Gemma often spoke about her favourite playgroup worker who was absent from the supported playgroup during this time. Gemma clearly missed this worker and wanted her to return *"so I can hug her."* Although this particular worker was not present, Gemma still thought of her as an adult who helped her while she was at the supported playgroup: *"She helped me to play ... she gives us stories but not the other teachers' stories."*

At Phase 2, Gemma again spoke about playgroup staff as helpers when she said, *"Sometimes they help me do stuff, like stuff I can't do, like get to the finish line where the balls are."* This was in reference to the playgroup staff helping Gemma complete a running race during the supported playgroup's mini Olympics. Gemma also identified playgroup staff as the adults who helped her when she was hurt: *"If I fall down, they pick me up."* Gemma made no further mention of playgroup staff as helpers during the last phase of research.

### **Summary of Supported Playgroup Children's Descriptions of Program Participation**

Children's experiences of the supported playgroup reflected the dominant aspects of service provision designed specifically for them. That is, children valued and enjoyed the

different play experiences and opportunities offered at the supported playgroup. Friendship networks were important for some children who attended the supported playgroup which suggested a sense of connection with other children. However, their experiences of program participation were influenced by the absence or presence of friends. Children perceived mothers as play partners and their main source of support or help at the supported playgroup.

**Change over time in children's descriptions.** Children's descriptions of some aspects of participation in the supported playgroup changed over the research period. While play featured significantly across the three phases, it was only after the introduction of the sand tray at Phase 2 that children spoke about outdoor play. This addition to the play experiences offered at the supported playgroup was received enthusiastically by the children. Changes over time to the way children spoke about friendships at the supported playgroup suggested friendship networks within the program context became progressively more important to children's experiences of program participation. Mothers remained children's main sources of support across the research period although this was not entirely unexpected considering the program context (parents remain on site with their children and are responsible for looking after them).

### **Preschool Children's Descriptions of Program Participation**

Three major themes were identified in relation to preschool children's descriptions of program participation. The first fell within the Services ecocultural construct and focused on play as the best thing about attending the preschool. The other two themes emerged in relation to Friendship Networks. Three other issues were raised by some of the children during the interviews: book reading (Services), preschool staff helping with children's injuries (Support), and feeling connected to preschool staff (Connectedness). Unlike the other two programs involved in this research, the preschool was the only program where mothers were not present

for the duration of the program day. As such, mothers (or parents) were not identified by the children as having any role within this context.

## Services

Play permeated most aspects of the preschool. Children engaged in play-based learning experiences and had designated ‘free play’ time (indoors and outdoors) during the preschool day. Play opportunities that existed during ‘free play’ were of particular importance to children’s experiences of program participation.

**Play as the best thing about preschool.** Across the research period, preschool children reported playing as the best thing about preschool. Specifically, outdoor play and playing with toys were the children’s favourite play experiences.

***“I like to play everything outside”: Outdoor play.*** At Phase 1 and 2, all ten preschool children reported outdoor play as one of their favourite activities at preschool. The preschool children particularly enjoyed playing in the sandpit (see Figure 5.7) as illustrated by Scarlett’s comment, *“We love playing in the sandpit”*. After taking a photograph of the children in the sandpit, Hugh also pointed out, *“I think the kids like the sandpit. They’re all in there.”* The preschool children spoke about enjoying other play equipment, such as the slide (*“I like the slide. It’s slippery”* – Theo) (see Figure 5.8) and the see-saw (*“[I] play on the see-saw with Daniel. I like going higher and higher and sometimes I fall off. It’s so much fun!”* – Sean).





*Figure 5.7.* Natalie's photograph of the sandpit at the preschool.



*Figure 5.8.* Michelle's photograph of the slide at the preschool.

A few of the children from the preschool sample (two pairs of best friends) spoke about competitive and physical outdoor play, such as running races and catching games. Hugh

spoke about running “*as fast as a rocket*” because he “*ate some berry soup and some pineapple*” but was disappointed because he was unable to catch his best friend. Michelle also spoke about being able to climb higher and run faster than her best friend at preschool. Competitive outdoor play was only mentioned by these children at Phase 1.

At Phase 3, fewer preschool children (six of the ten) reported outdoor play as one of the best things about attending the preschool. Even so, the sandpit and the other play equipment (i.e., slide, swings and see-saw) remained the children’s favourite features of outdoor play.

**Toys.** Although not as popular as outdoor play, playing with toys was reported by some of the children as one of the best things about preschool during each phase of the research. Six of the ten children spoke about their favourite toys at preschool during Phases 1 and 2. On the other hand, only two of the ten children spoke about toys at Phase 3.

While some girls from the preschool sample talked about playing in the home corner and with the dolls, Theo expressed a strong dislike for the “*dolly corner*” as “*they have babies and baby stuff ... ugh!*” The girls also enjoyed playing with construction toys such as Lego or wooden blocks while they were at the preschool. As Michelle said, “*I love to play blocks.*” Construction toys, particularly Lego, were also identified as favourites among the boys as Hugh commented, “*We can make anything with Lego*” (see Figure 5.9). On the other hand, Sean spoke about the “*Tonka trucks*” as his favourite toys but wished he could also play at preschool with his toy cars and racing tracks from home.



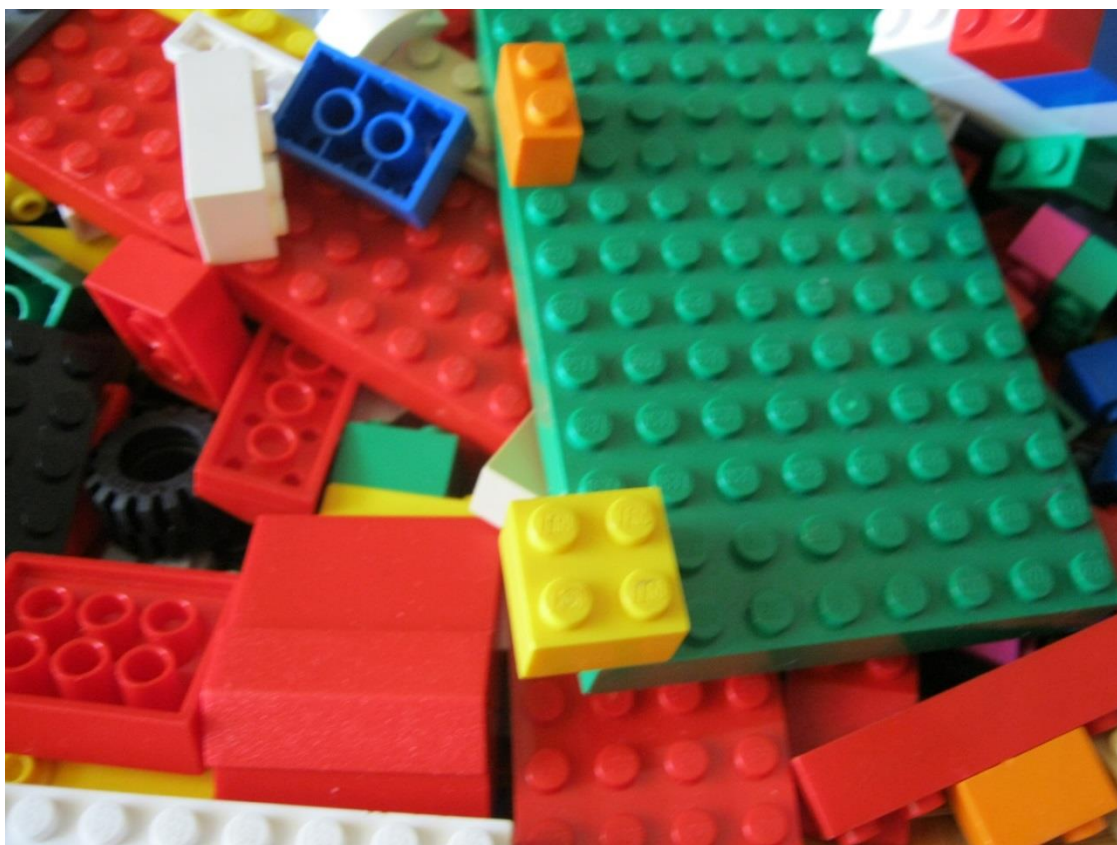


Figure 5.9. Hugh's photograph of the Lego at the preschool.

**Book reading.** This emerged as a minor theme for some children during the research. Books were visible and available for children to read and engage with at the preschool. Shared book reading (preschool staff reading a book with the children, usually as a group) was a consistent part of the daily routine. At Phase 1, three preschool children spoke about books however this was only during the photograph discussion and mostly in relation to the preschool staff reading books to the children (*"Teachers read them"* – Molly and *"[My teachers] read 'Goodbye Fergus' storybook to me"* – Noah). Fewer preschool children commented on books during the later stages of the research and these comments were about particular areas or spaces within the preschool setting. For example, Molly's favourite indoor area was the group room because *"we read books and we've got to sit down and we have to put our hand up and no talking."*

On the other hand, Hugh did not like the ‘quiet room’ designated for book reading (following Phase 1, the book shelf had been relocated from the middle of the main room to the ‘quiet room’, a smaller room off of the main room) but he was unable to articulate his reasons for this. Some of his dislike may have been due to the change in room use as previously the dress-up costumes were stored in the ‘quiet room’. While Hugh did not show any particular interest in the dress-up costumes, the researcher observed him and his best friend hiding behind the costumes that were hanging on a clothing rack. However, this game was no longer possible following the change in room use.

### **Friendship Networks**

Friendship networks were especially important to children’s experiences at the preschool. Children valued friendships and enjoyed playing with friends at preschool. However, these were not always positive experiences. Negotiating difficult peer interactions were viewed as negative aspects of program participation for some children. While a few children had their own specific strategies for dealing with these situations, others saw preschool staff as mediators of peer conflict.

**Playing with friends lots.** During data collection preschool children consistently spoke about their friends at preschool and many of the children chose to take photographs of their friends during the child-led photography activity. Children also viewed being able to play with their friends as one of their favourite things about coming to preschool as well as a reason for why children were attending preschool ( “*So I can see my friends all day*” – Molly). At each research phase, the researcher observed the participating children (especially the older children in the sample) engaged in cooperative play with their friends, particularly during outdoor play. This usually occurred in small groups of two to four children though most tended to play with the same group of children (even if they were friendly with all of the children). Children reported playing games based on television shows such as Pokémon,

Transformers, and Star Wars, playing with the outdoor play equipment, or chase-and-catch and hide-and-seek games with their friends.

**Negotiating peer relationships.** While most of the children spoke positively about their friends at preschool, others spoke about negative aspects of peer relationships. This included feeling left out or excluded, and being hurt or upset by other children. Furthermore, preschool staff were seen by four of the children as mediators of the children's social relationships at the preschool.

***Feeling excluded.*** Children readily identified their 'special' or 'best friends' at the preschool. While this displayed a growing sophistication in their friendships, it also complicated peer relationships for certain children as they felt excluded from playing and this impacted on their experiences of preschool. For example, at Phase 1 Molly spoke about only being able to play with one of her friends when another child was not at the preschool:

*"Scarlett doesn't like it when I play with Michelle when she's here. So when she's not here, I play with Michelle."* Similar situations occurred at each phase of the research. At Phase 2 another girl who enjoyed playing with Michelle had to ask permission to join in Scarlett's and Michelle's play. Likewise at Phase 3, Michelle said, *"Scarlett, we don't play with them"* when Scarlett named some other children as friends at preschool. Other children reported similar experiences. During Phase 2, Caleb talked about not wanting to go to preschool *"because Noah doesn't play with me anymore ... and Andrew too ... and Laura and I'm their friend."* This changed for Caleb during Phase 3 as he and Noah were playing together again.

***Being hurt or upset by other children.*** Another component of negotiating peer relationships within the preschool context was being hurt or upset by other children. Some children (three children at Phases 1 and 2, and six children at Phase 3) identified this as what they disliked about coming to the preschool as Molly explained, *"I don't like that people do*

*mean things to me.*” These children highlighted incidents that had happened at preschool between themselves and other children. For example, when Noah spoke about disliking people hurting him when he was at preschool he said, *“Oh, just people hurting me ... Andrew [threw] his container at me one day”* and Sean explained, *“I don’t like someone ... hit me or scratch me.”*

While some children told their preschool teachers when incidents with other children occurred, others (like Sarah and Hugh) also used their own strategies to deal with their emotions or behaviours triggered during negative peer experiences. At Phase 1 Sarah spoke about going to her hiding place at the preschool when she was upset by the other children. For example, after being angry with her friends for wanting her to play in the mud in her new clothes, Sarah spent time in her hiding place *“because I don’t want to feel angry. I don’t want people to talk to me ... because sometimes people make me angry.”* Similarly, Hugh excluded himself from certain peer groups intentionally. For example, Hugh was inclined to play exclusively with his best friends, Theo and Abigail, as some of the other children had previously hurt him. This sometimes meant Hugh purposely did not play with Theo as Theo was friends with those particular children. The following exchange occurred between Hugh and Theo at Phase 1 during their interview about program participation with the researcher:

Researcher: Do you have any other friends?

Theo: My other friends are Andrew...

Hugh: He’s not my friend. He’s like, bad to me.

Researcher: Who is?

Hugh: Andrew.

Researcher: Sometimes it’s just a bit hard to play nicely.

Hugh: Yeah.

Theo: And you always like Jacob, don't you? Cause he doesn't hurt you.

In relation to this theme, at Phase 1 two participant children understood the importance of not hurting others' feelings. They showed empathic responses towards other children at the preschool, and their comments also suggested an ability to feel and share another child's emotions in certain situations. Theo spoke about not knocking down other people's puzzles because "*if I knock it down, someone would get sad.*" The researcher also observed Noah preventing his friend from ruining another child's sand creation by saying, "*You didn't make it.*"

***Adults as mediators of children's conflict.***<sup>10</sup> This sub-theme captured children's descriptions of preschool staff (the primary adults in this context) as mediators of conflict within peer relationships. During the three phases of research, this theme was only evident in the boys' responses (four of the five boys from the preschool group) and was mostly in reference to preschool staff preventing or resolving disputes between the children and ensuring children were not hurting each other. For example, throughout data collection Hugh mentioned that his preschool teachers told the other children not to "*hit me, jump on me, step on me*" and "*They stop Andrew from doing mean stuff to us, like trapping us.*" Other boys, like Noah, talked about how he involved the preschool staff after he had been hurt by another child: "*Andrew hid and then I told them, her, the teacher where he was ... I tell them, 'Andrew hurt me' or something.*"

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<sup>10</sup> The sub-theme, adults as mediators, was included in Friendship Networks rather than Support. It was decided that the children's interview responses about this type of support provided by preschool staff (e.g., resolving conflicts) was better represented by the Friendship Networks construct.

## Support

This construct reflected children's perceptions of the support or help preschool staff gave them at the program. This theme emerged during some children's interviews and focused on the help preschool teachers provided when children were injured.

**Preschool staff help when children hurt themselves.** A small number of children (three out of ten) spoke about preschool staff helping them when they were injured by providing first-aid assistance. For example, at Phase 1 Molly said, *"When I have a sore, they help me...They helped me to put the cream on and then the band-aid"* and again at Phase 2 she commented, *"Well, when I fall over and have a bleed and hurt myself, they put band-aids on it and rub it."* At Phase 3, Noah similarly reported that the preschool staff *"give us band-aids when we get hurt."*

## Connectedness

Connectedness was important to experiences of preschool for some children, all of whom were girls.

**A loved person: Feeling connected to preschool staff.** This issue was conveyed by a small number of preschool children (two out of ten). Across the three phases of data collection, Sarah in particular, spoke consistently about how the preschool staff *"love me"* and *"They help me when I'm sad ... they cuddle me."* Molly made a similar comment about the preschool staff at Phase 3 when her mother was overseas: *"When I cry they make me happy and when I miss my mum."*

## Summary of Preschool Children's Descriptions of Program Participation

Play was a very important part of the preschool day from the perspectives of the children. They particularly valued outdoor play in this context. Friendship networks were also important to children's experiences of participation at the preschool although complexities

within peer relationships influenced negatively some children's experiences. Specific coping strategies (e.g., removing themselves from the situation or using preschool staff as mediators) appeared to help children negotiate these difficult peer interactions. Preschool staff were identified by some children as sources of support in the program context, and provided feelings of connectedness and love for other children.

**Change over time in children's descriptions.** Preschool children's descriptions of participation in the preschool remained mostly unchanged from Phase 1 to Phase 3. Play continued to be a significant feature of participation in the preschool although fewer children identified playing with toys at Phase 3. Similarly, friendship networks remained central to children's experiences across the research period. In addition, children's perspectives of preschool staff and how they influenced children's experiences of program participation did not appear to change over time.

### **Comparison of Children's Descriptions of Program Participation**

This section discusses the similarities and differences in the descriptions of program participation between the three groups of children (parenting program, supported playgroup and preschool). The ecocultural constructs are used as overarching themes to draw together similar themes that emerged during children's interviews. Change over time in children's descriptions and how this differed between the programs is also discussed.

### **Services**

This construct encompasses themes related to play and other activities at the programs as well as children's perceptions of the roles their mothers played at the programs.

**Play.** The design of all three programs reflected the importance and benefits for children of play in early childhood. Play was used or viewed in different ways at each the programs (e.g., therapeutic play at the parenting program and play-based learning at the

preschool). Even so, play was identified as the most salient aspect of program participation by children at all programs. Differences existed in the types of play children from each of the programs enjoyed or engaged in most frequently. Playing with toys was mentioned by children from all three groups and across all three phases of the research. Certain play objects or toys held particular significance for some parenting program and supported playgroup children. Attendance at the programs provided opportunities to play with toys different from the ones children had at their own homes. In some cases, toys also provided a sense of congruence between the program and home context as they were reminders of children's favourite toys at home.

Parenting program and preschool children also spoke about outdoor play as a favourite play experience over the three phases of research. Outdoor play was not identified to the same extent by the supported playgroup children. The children's preference for outdoor play may have been a reflection on the outdoor environments across the three programs. The outdoor play areas of the parenting program and preschool had fixed play structures, sandpits, tricycles, slides, and swings while these types of play equipment were absent from the supported playgroup (this was most likely due to the supported playgroup being held in the grounds of a primary school and not in the organisation's own premises).

In contrast to the parenting program and the preschool, outdoor play was also not a specific part of the daily routine of the supported playgroup. As parents remained with their children for the duration of the supported playgroup, children had more freedom in deciding where they played and what activities they engaged with while at the supported playgroup. The freedom to choose where to play was constrained by the availability of program staff to supervise indoor/outdoor play at the parenting program and the preschool.



In contrast to the other groups, supported playgroup children particularly enjoyed the art and craft activities. From the interviews, parenting program children did not talk about art and craft activities as significant to their program participation even though one parenting program centre had art and craft activities set up every morning for the children. At times, the researcher also observed parenting program mothers completing the art and craft activities while their children played elsewhere even though the activity had been designed as a shared activity to facilitate parent-child interaction.

**Book reading.** One-off comments were made by the parenting program and supported playgroup children in relation to books at the programs. However, book reading was an issue raised by a number of preschool children throughout the research period. Children's books were on display and available for the children at all three programs. Shared book reading was also a prescribed part of the supported playgroup's and preschool's routines. There was a dedicated time each day when the play facilitator (supported playgroup) and preschool teacher read and discussed a book with the children at these programs. The preschool children's comments were mostly in relation to this type of literacy activity.

The researcher observed some parenting program children independently looking at the picture books in the playroom of one of the parenting program centres. This particular centre had created a 'reading corner' for the children with child-size armchairs as well as book displays related to events throughout the year (e.g., books about Easter and rabbits around Easter time). In this way, the parenting program was similar to the preschool in the way children's books were displayed and available for children to enjoy. Shared book reading (program staff and child/children) occurred more often at this particular parenting program centre compared to the other centre involved in the research. However, at times other factors tended to impact on the ability of staff members to provide reading sessions (e.g., staff absences or dealing with crises). Unlike the supported playgroup and preschool, structured

literacy-based activities (such as daily shared book reading) did not appear to be a primary component of the parenting program, and from the children's reports books were not a meaningful part of their experiences of the program.

**Mothers at the programs.** Due to parents not being present in the preschool setting (parents did not remain with their children during the preschool day), this theme about mothers at the program was unique to children who attended the parenting program and the supported playgroup. While there was no separation from parents and children at the supported playgroup, parenting program children and parents were separated during the morning session (parents attended therapeutic group sessions on site while children remained with staff in the play room).

Parenting program children provided no specific accounts of any mother-child interactions that occurred while at the program during any phase of the research. This finding from the interviews parallels to some degree observations made by the researcher. Mother-child interactions occurred most often following arrival at the program as mothers settled their children into the playroom before joining the therapeutic support group for the morning session, or during lunch times when mothers were responsible for organising their children's lunches and everyone ate together. However, playful interactions between mothers and their children were not often observed by the researcher at the parenting program. When opportunities for this occurred (e.g., free play after lunch or after the therapeutic support group in the morning), parents often talked together while their children played separately, and at times program staff needed to encourage parents to interact with their children.

Supported playgroup children did mention mothers as play partners at the program. However, this was not a particularly dominant theme in the children's interviews across the research period. Gemma's limited play interactions with her mother at the supported

playgroup may have been due to her age and desire for independence within this context. Similarly, the children's age and growing independence may provide an explanation for the lack of reference to mother-child play or interactions in the parenting program children's accounts of program participation. However, of these two programs, the parenting program specifically aimed to increase parent-child play and improve parent-child interactions and relationships. Thus, the limited mention of mother-child interactions during the children's interviews was unexpected.

### **Friendship Networks**

This construct includes themes about children's experiences of friendships and other children in the program context, as well as negotiating peer interactions and social skills development.

**Friendships.** There were significant differences in children's experiences of friendships and peer relationships in the program context. Friendship networks were very important to preschool children, even for the youngest children in this group. They consistently talked about having friends and the different types of games they enjoyed playing with their friends. Supported playgroup children mentioned having friends at the program but they did not necessarily play with them in this context. However, the importance of friendship networks for some supported playgroup children was influenced by the absence or presence of selected peers.

In contrast, this theme was rarely mentioned by parenting program children. Claire was the only child from the parenting program who spoke about having a special friend at the program at any stage of the research. Parenting program children were not often observed playing together (as distinct from the preschool group) or initiating social contact with each

other even when they were playing the same activity. The following researcher observation at the parenting program provides an example of this.

*Three girls were playing on the slide during the morning session at the parenting program. Alfie spent some time watching the children before making his way over. A volunteer worker was with the girls and said, 'Ready, steady, go!' to each of the girls in turn as they went down the slide. When it was Alfie's turn he said to the volunteer worker, 'You have to say ready, steady, dino!' After the volunteer worker did this, Alfie went down the slide. Alfie continued to play on the slide for about five minutes however did not talk to or interact in any way with the girls. After the girls finished playing and moved on to another activity, Alfie slowly moved away from the slide as well.*

The following observation of preschool children playing together and initiating and responding to social contact with peers is offered as a comparison to the experiences of the parenting program children.

*Scarlett, Michelle and Sarah were digging a hole in the sandpit. The girls were putting the sand into different shaped buckets and containers and said they were making cupcakes. Sarah was using a shovel to scoop the sand out of the hole. As she was digging she said, 'I think there's treasure at the bottom of this hole.' Sarah pulled out a yellow plastic ball and said, 'I found the treasure! It's a yellow ball.' The girls continued digging. Another girl came over and asked if she could help Scarlett make her sand cupcakes. Scarlett said, 'Yes.'*

While differences between programs were apparent in the importance of friendship networks to children's experiences of program participation, one similarity was that play with siblings was rare at all programs. Catherine was the only child involved in the research who

played with a sibling (her younger brother at the supported playgroup). Children whose siblings also attended the program (two sibling pairs and a sibling trio from the parenting program, and one sibling pair from the preschool) were observed by the researcher to rarely play together.

**Negotiating peer relationships.** This theme was unique to the preschool sample's interviews and suggested more complex and sophisticated peer relationships and social development compared with the other two groups of children. Researcher observations of preschool children's social interactions offered further insight into these differences in social development (more so than in the parenting program and supported playgroup children). Peers played a significant role in children's experiences of preschool participation. However, sometimes, this meant negotiating difficult peer interactions. A number of preschool children had developed effective strategies for navigating through difficult or negative social interactions with their peers. Empathy and an understanding of how one's actions may affect another's feelings were also reflected in some preschool children's interview responses.

Difficult peer interactions were rarely observed by the researcher at the supported playgroup. This could be explained by the constant presence of parents within this context (compared to the preschool), and children remaining close by their parents for the duration of the program. Negative peer interactions were also not influential to parenting program children's experiences of program participation even though the researcher observed interactions between parenting program children in which a child was upset or hurt by another, or had difficulties approaching other children to play.

**Developing social skills.** Of all three programs, the parenting program had a particular focus on developing social competencies and skills in children. For example, at one parenting program centre preschool-aged children participated in the 10-session Playing and Learning

to Socialise (PALS) program in which children learned the fundamental skills needed to be competent in social interactions. This was done through the use of puppets, video scenarios, role-playing, and songs. In addition, parenting program staff modelled appropriate sharing, cooperation, and communication skills throughout the program, all skills necessary to effectively form, negotiate and maintain peer relationships. An example of this is shown in the following researcher observation.

*Another child wanted to play with a shovel in the sandpit but Lucas would not share his shovel. A staff member went over and demonstrated how to share the toys in the sandpit. After this Lucas got up and walked away to find something else to play with.*

Over the research period, the researcher observed changes in two of the five parenting program children's peer interactions and social skills. Claire shared the toys or play equipment more often during the later stages of the research (although this sometimes still required prompting from the program staff) and reacted less aggressively when other children interfered with her play (e.g., she would ask children to stop rather than yelling at them or snatching toys back). During Phases 2 and 3 another child, Lucas, asked staff more often to help him or used words such as, "No, my toy" or "No, move. You can't sit there." While this was not successful every time, Lucas demonstrated different strategies from his earlier behaviour which included pushing or yelling at the other children.

## **Support**

Children's experiences of adult support reflected largely the program context and the presence of particular adults in each setting.

**Mothers.** Parenting program and supported playgroup children reported mothers as their main source of support or help at the programs. It was not expected that this theme would be raised by preschool children as parents did not remain on site for the program.

While parenting program children were unable to elaborate on the type of support or help their mothers gave them, supported playgroup children reported mothers' involvement in specific routines of the program (e.g., morning tea preparation).

**Staff.** While staff were constantly present, the extent of children's engagement with staff differed depending on program type. However this was not always reflected in the child interviews. Parenting program children were observed to spend considerable time with the staff in the playroom while their mothers attended the morning group sessions. Throughout data collection, the researcher observed numerous interactions between staff and children. These included staff playing with the children, providing the children with morning tea, helping children complete craft activities, resolving disputes between children, and ensuring children did not hurt each other. As children spent time at the parenting program and formed relationships with the program staff over the duration of a year, it was expected that children would talk about program staff during their interviews. However, when asked who the adults were who helped them when they were at the parenting program, not one of these children mentioned staff in a helping role at any research phase. Children viewing their mothers as the adults who helped them at the parenting program may explain why children did not mention staff as helpers, although this only accounts for two of the five children in this group. Similarly, staff were also not mentioned by supported playgroup children as a main source of adult support or help at the program.

In contrast, preschool children tended to ascribe different roles to the staff such as mediators in peer conflict and administrators of first aid. The interview data suggested the importance of adults (program staff) to many facets of preschool children's experiences of program participation.

## **Change over Time in Children's Descriptions of Program Participation**

Children's descriptions of program participation were fairly consistent from Phase 1 to Phase 3 regardless of the program they attended. Play remained an important aspect of program participation for children from all three groups, although slight variations occurred in the type of play children spoke about. Friendship networks and connection to other children remained meaningful aspects of program participation for any child who spoke about this theme across the research period. Change over time to friendship networks occurred in the supported playgroup reflecting the importance of the presence of particular friends to children's experiences of the program. Lastly, children's perceptions of adults within the program context (i.e., mothers and program staff) did not significantly change over the research period, regardless of the program attended.

## **Children's Social Relationships and Peer Interactions within the Program Context**

This section addresses the question: *Is there a difference between the three programs in the quality of children's peer interactions, and does the quality of peer interactions change over time during program participation?* To answer this question, the personal-social development of children from each of the three programs is presented, based on results from the Personal-Social Domain (P-S) of the Battelle Developmental Inventory (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (BDI-2) Screening Test. This observational tool was used as a one-off measure of the children's social interactions with adults and peers, self-concept and social role. These results provide contextual and supplementary information about the children's personal-social development within the program setting.

The quality of children's peer interactions is based on results from the Peer Interaction Scale (PI), a subdomain of the Battelle Developmental Inventory (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (BDI-2). As explained in Chapter 4 the quality and frequency of a child's interactions with their peers, such as forming friendships, initiating and responding to social contact, and cooperating with



other children was assessed using the PI. At each of the three programs, children spent considerable time with other children, however peer interactions were observed by the researcher to be markedly different across the programs (these differences were also identified in the children's interview data presented previously in this chapter). Adults (program staff and/or parents) within the program context facilitated and modelled appropriate social interactions and behaviour for the children, and this was particularly evident at the parenting program while children were in the play room. Due to this, it was anticipated that over the research period there would be a positive change in parenting program children's peer interactions. The PI was included as an observational tool at each phase of the research as a means of documenting change over time in the quality of children's interactions with peers during program participation.

### **Children's Personal-Social Development**

In the current research, results from the P-S are thought of as providing context and an indication of the differences in personal-social development between the three groups of children. The measure was completed at the conclusion of Phase 1. As the P-S forms part of the BDI-2 Screening Test, results usually determine whether or not a child should be referred for a complete BDI-2 evaluation. The decision to refer a child is determined by the number of standard deviations (SD) below the mean of a child's raw score. For example, -1.0 SD below the mean would be considered borderline, -1.5 SD below the mean would be considered a clear indication for referral, and -2.0 SD below the mean would be considered a clear indication of serious developmental problems. A child receives a pass mark if their raw score exceeds the cut-off score associated with -1.0 SD below the mean. Table 5.2 presents the number of children in each category for the three programs.

Table 5.2

*Number of Children in Each BDI-2 Screening Test Personal-Social Domain Category*

Program	N	Pass	SDs below the Mean		
			1.0	1.5	2.0
Parenting Program	5	0	0	2	3
Supported Playgroup	3	2	1	0	0
Preschool	10	6	2	1	1

As shown in Table 5.2, differences existed in the children's personal-social development depending on the program they attended. No children in the parenting program received a pass mark and were all -1.5 to -2.0 standard deviations below the normative benchmark, as might be expected given the therapeutic context of this particular program. In contrast, most children in the supported playgroup and preschool groups achieved a pass.

### **Children's Peer Interactions**

The means and standard deviations for peer interactions for each program at the three phases of research are presented in Table 5.3. The means are calculated from the PI subdomain scaled score for each child in each program. The BDI-2 subdomain scaled scores are normalised standard scores with a mean of 10 and a standard deviation of 3 (average range is 8 to 12). Inspection of Table 5.3 indicates that parenting program children had the lowest scaled scores on the PI at every research phase. Taking into consideration the normalised standard scores, the parenting program children's PI scaled scores were more than 2 standard deviations below the mean across the research period. At each phase, the mean scaled score of the preschool children's PI was within the average range. While the mean scaled score of the supported playgroup children's PI was within the average range at Phases 2 and 3, there was a

significant difference in standard deviations which reflected a considerable range in scores for the two children in this sample. For example, at Phase 3 Catherine's PI scaled score was 5 while Gemma's was 14 which was well above the normative range.

Table 5.3

*Means and Standard Deviations for the PI Scale by Program (Phases 1-3)*

	<i>M (SD)</i>		
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Parenting Program <sup>a</sup>	2.00 (0.00)	2.40 (0.89)	2.00 (0.71)
Supported Playgroup <sup>b</sup>	6.50 (4.95)	8.00 (7.07)	9.50 (6.36)
Preschool <sup>c</sup>	9.60 (3.31)	11.00 (2.91)	11.30 (2.87)

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> N=5; <sup>b</sup> N=2; <sup>c</sup> N=8

Due to small sample sizes, non-parametric tests were used to analyse differences within and between groups. Results of these tests are based on medians. The median PI scale scores by program across the three phases of research are presented in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4

*Median PI Scale Scores by Program (Phases 1-3)*

	<i>Median</i>		
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Parenting Program <sup>a</sup>	2.00	2.00	2.00
Supported Playgroup <sup>b</sup>	6.50	8.00	9.50
Preschool <sup>c</sup>	9.00	10.50	11.00

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> N=5; <sup>b</sup> N=2; <sup>c</sup> N=8

Results from a Kruskal-Wallis test indicated statistically significant differences<sup>11</sup> in peer interactions between the three programs at Phase 1,  $\chi^2(2) = 10.60, p = .000$ , at Phase 2,  $\chi^2(2) = 9.90, p = .001$ , and at Phase 3,  $\chi^2(2) = 10.24, p = .001$ . To identify where differences existed in the PI scores between the programs and at which research phase, post-hoc analysis was completed using Mann-Whitney U tests for each pairwise comparison (parenting program/supported playgroup, parenting program/preschool, and supported playgroup/preschool). A Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons was made with statistical significance adjusted to  $p < .017$ .

Median PI scale scores for parenting program children and preschool children were significantly different at Phase 1,  $U = 0.00, z = -3.127, p = .000$ ; Phase 2,  $U = 0.00, z = -3.101, p = .001$ ; and Phase 3,  $U = 0.00, z = -3.078, p = .000$ . No significant differences in peer interactions were found between parenting program children and supported playgroup children at Phase 1,  $U = 0.00, z = -2.415, p = .048$ ; Phase 2,  $U = 1.00, z = -1.709, p = .095$ ; or Phase 3,  $U = 0.00, z = -2.010, p = .048$ . Similarly, no significant differences were identified in peer interactions between supported playgroup children and preschool children at Phase 1,  $U = 6.50, z = -0.757, p = .515$ ; Phase 2,  $U = 7.00, z = -0.653, p = .576$ ; or Phase 3,  $U = 7.50, z = -0.540, p = .667$ . The main finding from these analyses was that the quality of children's observed peer interactions was significantly lower for parenting program children than for preschool children and that this difference remained over the whole research period.

### **Change over time in Peer Interaction Results during Program Participation**

To determine if there was any significant change in the children's peer interactions from Phase 1 to Phase 3 across the three programs, a Friedman test was performed for each program. No statistically significant difference was found in peer interactions across the three

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<sup>11</sup> All statistical results are based on the exact significance rather than the asymptotic significance due to the small sample sizes.

phases of research for the parenting program children,  $\chi^2(2) = 2.00, p = .667$ , or for the supported playgroup children,  $\chi^2(2) = 3.71, p = .333$ . However, there was a non-significant trend towards improved peer interactions for preschool children across the three research phases,  $\chi^2(2) = 6.08, p = .050$  (level of significance .05).

## **Summary**

The quality of peer interactions for parenting program children was considerably lower than for supported playgroup and preschool children at each phase of the research. A statistically significant difference was found between parenting program and preschool children's peer interactions across the three research phases. Preschool children's peer interactions were of higher quality than parenting program children's. No statistically significant change over time was found in the parenting program or supported playgroup children's peer interactions though there was a trend for improvement in preschool children's peer interactions over time.

## **Mothers' Reports of Children's Program Participation**

This section addresses the sub-question: *How do mothers perceive their children's program participation, and does this change over time?* Results are based on the brief program participation survey mothers completed at Phases 1 and 3. The aim of this survey was to provide a general sense of how mothers viewed their children's participation in the programs, and why they wanted their children to attend. By completing the survey at two research phases, any changes over time in the mothers' reports during program participation could be identified. Further, these results add to the overall picture of program participation.

## **Mothers' Reports of Children's Participation: Descriptive Statistics**

As explained in Chapter 4, mothers were asked to rate a number of statements about their children's participation in the program using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly

disagree, 3 = neutral, and 5 = strongly agree). For analysis purposes, the 10 statements relating to mothers' views on their children's participation were divided into two sub-scales: social interaction, and play and learning experiences. Social interaction included four statements related to children's interactions with other children, program staff and parents at the program. Play and learning experiences included six statements related to children being able to engage in different kinds of play experiences (i.e., messy, creative, pretend, and physical) as well as group activities and early learning activities (i.e., early literacy and numeracy activities) while at the program (see Appendix 7). The sum of the scores given by each mother to the four statements within the social interaction scale (minimum score of 4, maximum score of 20) and the six statements within the play and learning experiences scale (minimum score of 6, maximum score of 30) were used in the statistical analysis. Table 5.5 presents the medians for the social interaction scale and the play and learning experiences scale for each program at Phases 1 and 3. Mothers most often rated each statement within the social interaction scale and play and learning experiences scale as 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly agree) regardless of program attended.

Table 5.5

*Median<sup>a</sup> Scores for Mothers' Reports of Children's Participation (Phases 1 and 3)*

	Parenting Program <i>N</i> = 4		Supported Playgroup <i>N</i> = 2		Preschool <i>N</i> = 8	
	<i>Mdn</i>		<i>Mdn</i>		<i>Mdn</i>	
	1	3	1	3	1	3
Social Interaction <sup>b</sup>	18.50	19.00	17.50	18.00	18.50	18.50
Play/Learning Experiences <sup>c</sup>	29.50	28.50	25.00	27.00	30.00	30.00

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> Medians are presented as non-parametric tests were used to analyse the data <sup>b</sup> Social interaction scale: minimum total score = 4, maximum total score = 20. <sup>c</sup> Play/learning experiences scale: minimum total score = 6, maximum total score = 30.

### **Differences in Mothers' Reports of Children's Participation**

Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed to ascertain if differences between programs existed in mothers' reports of children's participation on the social interaction scale score and the play and learning experiences scale score. Tests were performed on data for Phases 1 and 3. The analysis revealed that there was no significant difference between the programs in mothers' reports of children's participation in relation to social interaction at Phase 1,  $\chi^2(2) = 0.35, p = .860$ , or Phase 3,  $\chi^2(2) = 0.08, p = .955$ . Similarly, non-significant differences between programs were found for mothers' reports of children's participation in relation to play and learning experiences at Phase 1,  $\chi^2(2) = 2.90, p = .239$ , and at Phase 3,  $\chi^2(2) = 1.46, p = .513$ . In summary, mothers in each program reported similarly high and positive perceptions of the play and social interaction contexts for their children in each program.

### **Change over time in Mothers' Reports of Children's Participation**

Change over time in mothers' views of their children's participation in the three programs was also of interest. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks tests were used to assess possible change in each program. No significant differences were found between Phases 1 and 3 for parenting program mothers' perspectives on their children's social interactions,  $z = -0.58, p = 1.000$ , or play and learning experiences,  $z = -1.34, p = .500$ . Similarly, there were no significant differences found for supported playgroup or preschool mothers' perspectives on their children's social interactions ( $z = -1.00, p = 1.000$ ;  $z = -1.84, p = 1.000$  respectively) or play and learning experiences ( $z = -1.00, p = 1.000$ ;  $z = -1.34, p = .500$  respectively) between Phases 1 and 3.

### **Summary**

Mothers from all programs generally agreed or strongly agreed to statements about their children's program participation in relation to social interaction, and play and learning experiences as aspects they liked about their children attending the program. No statistically

significant difference was found between programs in mothers' ratings of social interaction and play and learning experiences. Furthermore, there was no significant change over time in parenting program, supported playgroup or preschool mothers' reports of children's participation between Phases 1 and 3.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented results in relation to program participation based on children's descriptions of their experiences, children's observed peer interactions within the program context, and mothers' reports of children's participation in the programs.

From child and mother accounts, play experiences were a very important component of program participation, regardless of program attended. Play was reported by the children from all programs as the best thing about program participation across the research period. Differences in the types of play children enjoyed the most were apparent. These differences most likely reflected the environment at each program and the affordances available in terms of indoor and outdoor play.

There was a clear association between children's narrative accounts of friendship networks and the quality of peer interactions. Over the course of the program, children in the parenting program maintained the lowest peer interaction scores of all three groups of observed children. This was slightly surprising due to the efforts of staff to improve children's social skills and relationships with peers while at the program. In addition, friendship networks were rarely spoken about as important to children's experiences at the parenting program. However, mothers viewed social interactions as an important part of their children's participation at the parenting program. This difference in perspectives revealed that mothers' views may not always match their children's.



In general, friendship networks appeared to be more important to preschool children's experiences of program participation and the data (interview and Batelle developmental assessment) suggested preschool children were at a different stage of their social development than for parenting program children and some supported playgroup children. Age may also account for some of the differences in social relationships and peer interactions as preschool children were the oldest on average of the three groups.

In parenting program research, young children have rarely been asked to report on changes they see in their families during program participation. As such, the current research aimed to understand not only children's views of program participation but also how young children described their everyday home and family life and perceived changes in their families during involvement in the parenting program. The next chapter presents these results.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **RESULTS: LIFE AT HOME**

#### **CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF EVERYDAY HOME LIFE DURING PROGRAM PARTICIPATION**

This chapter addresses the second research question: *How do young children perceive everyday home and family life during program participation, and does this change over time?* It was expected that parenting program children's descriptions of everyday home life would change over time as the parenting program aimed directly to facilitate and support change in families. Some change in supported playgroup children's descriptions of home life was also expected, although to a lesser extent as the supported playgroup delivered more universal and less intensive family support than the parenting program. This chapter begins with a presentation of further contextual information about the children's families and home environments. The children's perspectives of everyday home life are then explored and any changes to these perspectives during program participation highlighted.

#### **Further Information about Children's Families**

This section presents data related to major life events experienced by mothers as well as the children's home environments.

#### **Major Life Events**

Data about major life events experienced by the mothers was collected at Phase 1 (for the preceding 12 months) and again at Phase 3 (for the research period). The prevalence of major life events is presented in Table 6.1 for both data collection periods. Data is missing for one supported playgroup mother and two preschool mothers at Phase 1 due to the mothers not completing the Life Events Questionnaire. Data is also missing for two preschool mothers at Phase 3 for the same reason. Data has only been used once for the mother with two preschool children involved in the research.

Table 6.1

*Prevalence of Major Life Events Reported by Mothers*

	Parenting Program		Supported Playgroup		Preschool	
	Phase 1	Phase 3	Phase 1	Phase 3 <sup>a</sup>	Phase 1	Phase 3
N	5	5	2	2	7	7
Major life events (n = no. of mothers)						
0	-	3	-	-	4	3
1	-	1	1	2	2	2
2	2	-	-	-	-	1
3	1	-	1	-	-	-
4	-	1	-	-	-	-
5 or more	2	-	-	-	1	1
<i>M</i>	4.2	1.0	2.0	1.0	1.1	1.7
Range	2-8	0-4	1-3	1	0-6	0-8

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> While Phase 1 data for the supported playgroup is based on the three families recruited, Phase 3 data is only for the mothers of the two children who remained in the research.

As shown in Table 6.1, at Phase 1 all parenting program mothers reported having experienced more than one major life event in the preceding 12 months. These life events were mostly related to physical violence (n = 2, being pushed, grabbed, shoved, kicked, or hit), relationships (n = 3, breakdown of close personal relationship; divorce or separation; becoming a sole parent; increased hassles with parents; or serious conflict between family members), decreased income (n = 2), legal troubles or involvement in a court case (n = 2), and death of a partner or close family member (n = 2). On the other hand, birth of a child (n = 1), decreased income (n = 1), and work or study issues (n = 1, return to study; difficulty finding a job) were the most commonly experienced life events reported by the supported playgroup mothers during the same period. Similarly, life events experienced by preschool mothers were mostly related to children (n=2, e.g., birth of a child; miscarriage), and work (n=1, e.g., resumption of work outside the home). However, one preschool mother had experienced a

total of six major life events in the previous 12 months. These were mostly associated with a relationship breakdown and becoming a sole parent.

At Phase 3, three of the five parenting program mothers reported no major life events during the research period. This suggested that for these parenting program mothers, life may have become more stable during program participation. The life events reported by the other two parenting program mothers were related to employment ( $n = 1$ , resumption of work outside the home), children ( $n = 1$ , birth of a child; having a child with a disability or serious illness), and decreased income ( $n = 1$ ). When compared to Phase 1, at Phase 3 slightly more preschool mothers (four of the seven who completed the questionnaire) reported having experienced one or more life events over the research period. These life events were similar to those experienced by the parenting program mothers. They included issues with employment ( $n = 3$ , resumption of work outside the home; difficulty finding a job) and birth of a child ( $n = 1$ ) as well as death of a close friend ( $n = 2$ ). No change was evident for the preschool mother who had reported five or more life events at Phase 1 as similar life events were reported at Phase 3, and once again these mostly involved issues surrounding a relationship breakdown as well as issues related to employment and study. The prevalence of major life events reported by supported playgroup mothers remained fairly stable between the two data collection periods. At Phase 3, major life events experienced during the research period by these mothers included resumption of work outside the home ( $n = 1$ ), and involvement in a serious accident ( $n = 1$ ).

The data suggested differing levels of stressors were present in the lives of mothers (and their children) across the three programs at Phase 1. In the 12 months prior to the commencement of the research, the data also suggested that the parenting program group, in general, experienced major life events that were different to those of the other two groups, particularly in terms of physical violence, relationship problems, and legal troubles. However,

more than half of the mothers who attended the parenting program reported no major life events during program participation. Further, when major life events were reported at Phase 3 by mothers who attended the parenting program, they were similar to those reported by supported playgroup and preschool mothers.

## Home Environments

Mothers completed the HSQ at Phases 1 and 3. As explained in Chapter 4 the HSQ was used to screen the child's home environment for factors related to a child's growth and development, including organisation of the home, parental involvement, variety of stimulation, and play materials. In accordance with the HSQ manual, lower scores (41 or below) indicate a possible risk to the child's optimal growth and development due to factors within the home environment. Descriptive statistics for the HSQ at Phases 1 and 3 are reported in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2

### *Descriptive Statistics for the HSQ Results at Phases 1 and 3*

	Parenting Program		Supported Playgroup		Preschool <sup>a</sup>	
	Phase 1	Phase 3	Phase 1	Phase 3 <sup>b</sup>	Phase 1	Phase 3
N	5	5	3	2	9 <sup>c</sup>	7 <sup>d</sup>
<i>M (SD)</i>	36.60 (5.08)	36.00 (6.96)	39.33 (3.51)	40.50 (10.61)	43.56 (2.13)	45.43 (2.57)
Range	28-40	30-44	36-43	33-48	41-47	42-48

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> The HSQ scores for the two preschool children from the same family were different and as such, each score has been used in the analysis. <sup>b</sup> While Phase 1 data for the supported playgroup is based on the three families recruited, Phase 3 data is only for the families of the two children who remained in the research. <sup>c</sup> At Phase 1, data was missing for one preschool child as the HSQ was not completed. <sup>d</sup> At Phase 3, data was missing for three preschool children as the HSQ was not completed.

As can be seen in Table 6.2, parenting program families had the lowest mean HSQ scores at Phases 1 and 3 and remained in the ‘at-risk’ category (score of 41 or below). It must be noted that three of five parenting program families’ HSQ results improved over the research period, and at Phase 3 two of the three families received a score above 42. For these two families, this suggested a positive shift in the home environment as a site for child growth and development. The mean HSQ results for supported playgroup families were also in the ‘at-risk’ category at Phases 1 and 3. However, there was a significant difference in the standard deviation at Phase 3 reflecting a large range in HSQ scores for supported playgroup families. Preschool families had the highest mean HSQ scores across the research period.

## **Summary**

Parenting program mothers on average experienced more major life events in the 12 months previous to the research period than mothers from the two comparison groups. However, the data suggested that for parenting program families, life may have become more stable and less chaotic during program participation as three of the five mothers reported no major life events at Phase 3. On average, parenting program families scored lower on the measure of the home environment (HSQ) than the two comparison groups, and on average remained in the ‘at-risk’ category during involvement in the parenting program. However, two parenting program families were no longer in the ‘at-risk’ category at Phase 3 and this improvement suggested positive changes were being made to the home environment in relation to factors associated with a child’s growth and development. This may reflect an outcome of participation in the parenting program for these families of increased parental understanding of factors in the home environment that support or promote positive development in children.

## **Children's Perceptions of Everyday Home Life during Program Participation**

This section presents the themes identified within the child interviews as they discussed their perceptions of everyday home life during program participation. The conversations with children were guided by an ecocultural approach, that is, children were asked about daily routines (activity settings) within the home environment, structured around four ecocultural dimensions: Domestic Workload, Connectedness, Friendship Networks, and Structure of the Home Environment. Conversation with the children was initiated and supported by the researcher asking a mix of concrete and specific questions along with open-ended questions about their routines (e.g., morning, dinner and bedtime routines) as well as other activities (e.g., playtime) that made up their day. While these questions facilitated the conversation, every effort was made to ensure communication was fluid and the interviewer was responsive to any issues raised by the children, and to provide a supportive environment in which the children were able to share their own perspectives on what was important to them in their everyday home life.

Because the interviewer sought to follow the lead of the children, issues raised by the children that were beyond the interview schedule were pursued by the researcher. This meant that some issues that were raised by one group of children (or one particular child in a group) may not have been raised by another. The interviews were analysed thematically to understand the ways in which the children perceived their everyday home life, as well as the differences and similarities between the three groups of children. The four ecocultural constructs that guided these interviews served as overarching a priori themes, with emergent sub-themes identified. The ecocultural dimension, Diversity, was also included as this emerged during analysis. These themes are summarised in Table 6.3. The table also includes minor themes (under the ecocultural constructs) which emerged as significant for some individual children, but were not prevalent amongst the group.

Table 6.3

*Themes from Children's Perceptions of Everyday Home Life*

Parenting Program	Supported Playgroup	Preschool
Domestic Workload		
Mothers help at home	Mothers help at home and fathers go to work	Mothers and fathers help at home but fathers also go to work
	Helping at home	Helping at home
	Pride in taking care of myself (minor theme)	Taking care of myself
Connectedness		
Playing with parents sometimes		Playing with parents lots
Playing with siblings lots	Playing and fighting with siblings	Playing with siblings lots
Playing alone sometimes	Playing alone when parents are too busy	Playing alone when parents are working (minor theme)
Family meals are a quiet time to eat	Sometimes family meals are a time to talk and share	Family meals are a time to talk and share
	Loving moments between parents and children	Loving moments between parents and children
		Missing dad when parents separate (minor theme)
Friendship Networks		
Friends coming to play		Preschool friends coming to play
Structure of the Home Environment		
	Enjoyment of story-telling and books	Shared book reading (minor theme)
Diversity		
	A blend of two cultures (minor theme)	



Table 6.3 provides an overview of the themes that were identified for each group of children. Some themes were similar across the three groups while others were identified by one or two of the groups of children. These themes are discussed below for each group of children (parenting program, supported playgroup and preschool).

### **Parenting Program Children's Perceptions of Everyday Home Life**

Themes within the Domestic Workload, Connectedness, and Friendship Network ecocultural constructs emerged from the interviews with the parenting program children about their everyday home lives. These themes were raised by at least two of the five children during the research period.

#### **Domestic Workload**

This construct encompassed children's perceptions of parental caregiving and mother/father involvement in domestic tasks.

**Mothers help at home.** Parenting program children reported mothers as the parent who engaged most frequently in the day-to-day caregiving tasks in the home environment. (At Phase 1, children from two-parent families described both parents helping them, although during Phases 2 and 3, parenting program children described mothers, rather than fathers, as helpers). Children spoke about the different ways their mothers helped them at home, including brushing teeth (*"She makes me brush my teeth"* – Alfie), and preparing for bed (*"[Mum] puts my jammies on"* – Michael). Mothers were also reported to be the parent who helped them get dressed, although some children did this by themselves. For example, while Claire reported during Phase 1 that her mother helped choose her clothes, she consistently reported dressing herself (*"I get dressed on my own"*).

## Connectedness

For parenting program children, connectedness within family relationships reflected themes about playing with parents and siblings even though playing alone was also a part of some children's everyday routines at home. Families shared meal times together although these were quiet times, and not times to talk and share.

**Playing with parents sometimes.** Two parenting program children (both boys) spoke about playing with their parents at home. Michael spoke during Phase 1 about playing with play dough at home with his father and playing "*with the big toys [with] mummy and dad*" during Phase 2. The other boy, Lucas, lived in a single-parent family and commented during Phase 3 on play fighting with his mother and siblings.

**Playing with siblings lots.** Over the research period, all but one parenting program child (four out of five) spoke about playing with their siblings at home. The child who did not report playing with siblings had siblings who were at least five years older and attended school during the day.

Boys who attended the parenting program spoke about playing different games or with different toys when they played with their siblings rather than their parents. During Phase 1, Lucas spoke about "*playing cars*" with his brother and Alfie spoke about playing with his brothers with dinosaur toys. The games mentioned did not change in the later stages of the research. For example, Lucas spoke again about playing with dinosaur toys and play-fighting with his brother, and Alfie once again spoke about playing with toy cars and dinosaurs with his brothers. Alfie, who shared a bedroom with his older brother, also mentioned that they enjoyed making shadow puppets when they were meant to be asleep and that their father would "*come up the stairs and take the torch ... [and] say 'No making shadow puppets.'*" Even though Michael, another child at the parenting program, identified his younger sister as

someone he played with at home, when questioned further about the games or toys they played with during Phase 1, he only spoke about them watching cartoons together. During Phase 3, however, he spoke about playing with his sister with toy cars.

Claire, the one girl from the parenting program sample, liked playing teddies with her baby brother, Brad as *“he doesn’t mess my bedroom up”* in the same way as her younger sister, Naomi. During Phase 2, Claire mentioned playing with both of her siblings as they helped her complete her favourite puzzle even though *“Brad just pulls the pieces apart; Naomi does too”*. However during Phase 3 Claire once again reported that she did not play with her younger sister in the home context. When questioned about why she did not play with her younger sister, Claire gave the same reason she gave about playing with her baby brother during Phase 1: *“Because she always messes my room a lot.”*

**Playing alone sometimes.** Even though most of the parenting program children mentioned playing with their siblings in the home environment, some of the children also spoke about playing by themselves at some stage of the research. Only Claire and Lucas reported playing with toys by themselves during Phase 1. For Claire, solitary play coincided with her mother making dinner. When asked who he played with at home, Lucas responded, *“No, just me.”* Although parenting program children had identified playing with others within the home context during Phase 3 four of the five parenting program children also spoke about playing by themselves during some part of their day.

**Family meals are a quiet time to eat.** Over the research period, three of the five parenting program children said that their families were together during meals, particularly for dinner. From these children’s reports, it seemed that meal times were a time to eat and interactions between family members were not encouraged. For example, during Phase 2 Claire described her mother telling her to be quiet during dinner time (*“My mum says*

*shush*”). Conversations with the children during Phase 3 suggested that this did not change over the research period, and children did not know the reason for not being able to talk at meal times:

*Researcher: And do you guys talk about anything at dinner time?*

*Michael: No.*

*Researcher: No?*

*Michael: Mum shush when we eat.*

*Researcher: Pardon?*

*Michael: Mum shush when we eat.*

*Researcher: Oh, your mum asks you to be quiet when you eat?*

*Michael: Yeah.*

*Researcher: Do you know why?*

*Michael: No.*

*Researcher: Do you talk about anything at breakfast?*

*Claire: Yes.*

*Researcher: What do you talk about?*

*Claire: My mum doesn't let me talk about Naomi or Brad [siblings].*

*Researcher: Doesn't let you talk about ... pardon?*

*Claire: My mum and dad won't let me talk to Naomi or Brad.*

*Researcher: Oh. How come?*

*Claire: Because.*

### **Friendship Networks**

This construct explored the inclusion or presence of children's friends in the home environment.

**Friends coming to play sometimes.** During Phase 1, parenting program children did not talk about playing with their friends at home. This was however mentioned by two parenting program children during the later stages of the research. During Phase 2, Lucas spoke about playing games with his neighbour at home although he did not elaborate on what types of games they played. Similarly, during Phase 3 Claire spoke about her best friend from the parenting program coming to her house to play.

### **Summary of Parenting Program Children's Perceptions of Home Life**

Parenting program children's perceptions of everyday home and family life fell within three ecocultural constructs: Domestic Workload, Connectedness, and Friendship Networks. Mothers were perceived by children as the parent primarily responsible for day-to-day caregiving and domestic tasks. A sense of connectedness in family relationships was suggested through children's descriptions of play with different family members. Siblings appeared to play a key role in the lives of parenting program children particularly in terms of play in the home environment. It was in the sibling relationship that connectedness was most noticeable. While families shared meals together, they seemed to be more about the activity of eating than opportunities to talk and share, and to reconnect with each other. Friendship

networks and the presence of friends at children's homes were more commonly reported during the later stages of the research.

**Change over time in children's perceptions.** Based on the aims of the parenting program, it was anticipated that children's perceptions of everyday home life would change over time as an outcome of program participation. Not all children described change in their home environment from Phase 1 to Phase 3. However, change was found for two children, Lucas and Claire, and these changes were meaningful in their experiences of everyday home and family life. Lucas described playing with his mother during Phase 3 when previously he had only spoken about playing with his brother or on his own. This suggested a possible change in the parent-child relationship and over time an improvement in the connectedness of this particular parent-child dyad. Change was also reflected in the perceptions of Lucas and Claire as they spoke for the first time about their friends coming to play at their homes during Phases 2 and 3. The changes to children's experiences of friendship networks in the home environment alluded to the emergence of social networks in these families' lives that may have not been present before. The changes described by children relate to some of the aims and intended outcomes of the parenting program particularly in relation to supporting positive parent-child relationships through encouraging parent-child play as well as reducing social isolation for families.

### **Supported Playgroup Children's Perceptions of Everyday Home Life**

Themes that emerged from supported playgroup children's interviews focused on the constructs of Domestic Workload, Connectedness, and Structure of the Home Environment. These themes were present in the Phase 1 conversations with at least two of the three supported playgroup children and were present in conversations with both of the children who formed the supported playgroup sample during Phases 2 and 3. Minor themes (within the Domestic Workload and Diversity ecocultural constructs) also emerged during analysis of

interviews with Gemma and have been included as they represented a unique and significant perspective of everyday home life for this particular child.

### **Domestic Workload**

Two themes were captured within this construct in relation to their perceptions of mothers' and fathers' roles in and outside of the home and children's roles in helping at home. A minor theme about pride in taking care of oneself is also included.

**Mothers help at home and fathers go to work.** Over the three phases of research, the supported playgroup children spoke about their mothers as the main parent who helped them at home. For example, mothers of supported playgroup children helped them get their breakfast organised (*"Mummy gets my breakfast out"* – Catherine), get dressed (*"Mummy dresses me"* – Catherine), and get ready for bed (*"Mummy helps me, she gives me stories"* – Gemma). In contrast, fathers were not reported as helpers within the home environment and were more often spoken about in relation to going to work (*"He goes to work in the day time ... bangs on nails"* – Rosie and *"He got to give food to people ... he's a perfect chef!"* – Gemma).

**Helping at home.** This theme encompassed the practical ways supported playgroup children helped at home including tasks, chores or responsibilities. Tasks completed by children were usually for the benefit of the whole family. For example, during Phases 1 and 3 Gemma spoke about helping her mother cook dinner and during Phase 1, Catherine explained that it was her responsibility (with the help of her older brother and sister) to set the table for dinner. Catherine also helped at home by packing away her toys after she had finished playing with them. Caring for the family's pet was another way children helped at home. Over the course of the research, Gemma spoke about her pets and specifically the role she played in caring for them. Gemma often told how she played with her pet rabbit during the day and that

she “[fed] her broccoli.” She also explained “*me and my dad and my sister, three people*” cared for their four goldfish.

**Pride in taking care of myself.** This minor theme emerged only during Gemma’s interviews. Over the research period, Gemma seemed proud of her ability to do things for herself (self-care tasks) and her growing independence. During Phase 1, Gemma explained “*I jump out of bed, I wash my face and I get ready for school [playgroup]*” though at times her mother helped with her clothing choices: “*Sometimes I choose my clothes and sometimes my mummy helps me.*” At Phase 2, independence with everyday self-care tasks was again identified by Gemma as she said, “*I watch a little bit of [television] and I brush my teeth.*” From her perspective being capable of completing these tasks independently of her parents was related to her age as, when asked about completing these tasks by herself, she replied “*I’m almost five!*”

## **Connectedness**

The connectedness of supported playgroup families was captured in this construct. From the children’s perspectives, positive and negative experiences in relationships impacted on family connectedness. Tangible moments of love in the parent-child dyad were also important to children in supported playgroup families.

**Playing and fighting with siblings.** Over the research period, two girls from the supported playgroup identified their siblings as the person/people they played with at home. Catherine (who had an older brother and sister and a baby brother) spoke about playing with each of her siblings during every stage of the research. She reported playing with different toys or doing different activities with each of them. For example, Catherine played teddies with her older sister, rode bikes with her older brother, and played “*with Tim [baby brother] everywhere ... I like to play with toys with Tim.*”



During Phases 1 and 2, Gemma talked about a number of favourite games she played with her older sister at home: “*We play hide and seek and we play shopping ... I have a shopping set. I have a make-up set!*” and reported that they “*...talk about silly things. Silly play ... [we] play silly games ... and my sister laughs ...*” From these conversations, it appeared that Gemma enjoyed her sister’s company although at times she boasted about scaring her older sister:

*Sometimes I just play hide and seek with my sister ... I have the loudest counting because I’m good at counting ... And I’m good at finding ... And I scare my sister and she goes ‘Argh’ [makes screaming noise] ... She does it when I say ‘Boo.’ When I say that ... she gets ... she just runs to the sofa ... she goes right behind the sofa ... Boo!*

At Phase 3, Gemma did not report playing with her sister at home. From Gemma’s perspective, their relationship had changed and she often spoke about the conflict that occurred between them. Gemma perceived her sister as the instigator of this conflict as demonstrated by her quote: “*My sister did this to me [shows researcher a scratch on her arm] and I had to bite her leg.*”

Sharing a bedroom also caused tension in Gemma’s relationship with her sister. This was particularly evident as the research progressed. At Phase 1, Gemma explained how good it was that her older sister slept in the top bunk because she was afraid of heights. However, during Phase 2, Gemma spoke of how she “*... hates getting up in the morning ... [because her] sister wakes [her] up.*” She also declared, “*I want my own bedroom, as I’m still big enough, I want my own bedroom ... I hate my sister sharing my bedroom.*” A similar conversation between Gemma and the researcher occurred during the final research phase. Following a question in relation to whether there was anything else she did not like about bedtime, Gemma said, “*I can’t sleep. My sister keeps wobbling the bed.*”

Television watching was a particular source of sibling conflict for Gemma and Catherine. They both commented on their older siblings having greater control over the television. Gemma told how her sister “...*only watches [television] and never ever shares her [television]*” while fights between Catherine and her siblings occurred when she had to wait her turn to watch her own television shows:

*And Max [older brother] coming downstairs ... says ‘Max wants to watch a show’ but me says ‘Me want to watch my show’, like that ... And all fighting together ... And Laura [older sister] wants to watch a [television] show ... Only Max watch and Laura watch after ... And Max watch one more. And Max says, ‘Laura’s show now and my show now.’*

**Playing alone when parents are too busy.** Rosie and Gemma both spoke about playing by themselves at home during Phase 1. During the day, Gemma and Rosie stayed at home with their mothers while their older sisters attended primary school, and their fathers were at work. During Phase 1, both of these girls did not seem bothered by this. Playing alone appeared to be a regular and accepted part of their everyday home life. For example, at Phase 1 Gemma reported dancing by herself at home. This did not seem to concern Gemma because “*I only dance with myself because anyone don’t like dancing, only me like dancing ... I’ve very good at it. I can twirl.*”

However, Gemma’s perceptions of playing alone changed during the later stages of the research<sup>12</sup>. During Phases 2 and 3 Gemma reported playing alone (mostly with her toys or pet rabbit) at home during some part of her day. In these later phases, Gemma appeared less enthusiastic and positive about solitary play. In Phase 2, Gemma perceived the reason she played alone at home was because her parents were either too busy or unavailable (at work) to

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<sup>12</sup> Following Phase 1, Rosie and her mother no longer attended the playgroup. For this reason, only Gemma’s perceptions of playing alone within the home environment are presented for Phases 2 and 3.

play with her (*“My mummy’s too busy and my daddy’s ... he’s gone to work”*). At Phase 3 she also commented, *“Well, there’s nothing else for me to do. Nothing with my dad, nothing with my sister, nothing with my mummy ... playing with my rabbit.”*

**Sometimes family meals are a time to talk and share.** Across the research period, families of the supported playgroup children shared their evening meal. However family interactions during shared meal times were only mentioned during Phase 1. These interactions involved recounting events that occurred during the day for each family member. For example, Catherine said, *“We talk about Max [older brother] going to school”* and *“[I talk] about playgroup.”*

Even though the supported playgroup children reported eating dinner together as a family during Phases 2 and 3, they did not report any talk during this time. For example, when asked if her family spoke about anything during dinner, Gemma commented, *“No, because there’s nothing to talk about when you’re eating dinner.”*

**Loving moments between parents and children.** This theme captured feelings of love and expressions of affection as well as responsive, warm and reciprocal day-to-day interactions between parents and children. Supported playgroup children, particularly Gemma, spoke warmly about their parents and reported several tangible moments of connectedness. At Phase 1, Gemma spoke about being tickled affectionately by her father and during Phase 2, she declared her father *“[was] the cleverest dad ever”* because he sat beside her at dinner time. In relation to her mother, Gemma spoke about cooking with her mother as her favourite thing to do. During Phases 2 and 3 she commented, *“[my mum] gives me stories”* and *“[my mum] gives me hugs”* at bed time. Similarly, Catherine described talking to her mother at bed time before *“mummy says goodnight.”*

However, during Phase 3 Gemma expressed feelings of loneliness when parent-child closeness was difficult due to parental absence. When her father returned to his home country to visit a sick family member, Gemma commented, *“Well, my dad’s gone ... I haven’t got anything to do with my dad so I’m alone.”*

### **Structure of the Home Environment**

This construct focused on learning activities within the home environment. Story-telling and books were a part of supported playgroup children’s routines at home.

**Enjoyment of story-telling and books.** This theme captured the supported playgroup children’s enjoyment of books, including accounts of shared book reading within the home environment. Both Gemma and Catherine identified story-telling and book reading as part of their everyday home life throughout the research period. Gemma spoke affectionately about her father telling her fairy stories of his own (*“He tells me lots of stories ... [about] the prince’s necklace in the water and a small man just found it”*) and about her mother reading her books at bedtime (*“My mum reads me a story”*).

Catherine reported that she often visited the library with her family and expressed joy at this activity. She said, *“[I] want to read books. You go there to read books.”* At times Catherine would bring her library books to the supported playgroup to share with the researcher explaining, *“You’ve got to read it [to me].”* Afterwards, Catherine would ask the playgroup facilitator to read the book again at story-time. Interestingly, while Catherine visited the library with her parents and siblings and borrowed numerous picture books, when asked who read with her at home, she said, *“By myself.”*

### **Diversity**

In the current study, supported playgroup families were the most culturally diverse group of the three programs. Rosie’s mother identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait

Islander and Catherine's family spoke mostly English although her father was Filipino and he sometimes spoke in his native language at home. However, cultural diversity only emerged during Gemma's interviews and has been included as a minor theme as it was meaningful to her experiences of everyday home and family life. Her mother, father, and sister were born overseas and their family spoke mostly Singhalese at home.

**A blend of two cultures.** This theme captured a significant and distinctive part of Gemma's everyday home life. At various times during the research, Gemma spoke about her family's culture and its influence on different aspects of family life. One such aspect was breakfast. Gemma explained that she sometimes ate Weetbix (a typical Australian breakfast cereal). However, during Phases 2 and 3, she mostly spoke about eating culturally traditional breakfast dishes her mother prepared: *"We eat rice ... I can't remember what we eat, the name we say, the Australian way, it's something you put milk in... it's rice but it's more soft and cooked."*

During other interviews with Gemma, she referred to family members using terms from her home language. When the researcher asked, *"Does that mean 'sister' in Singhalese?"* Gemma felt the need to explain, *"But ... I was born in Australia"* (most of her family members were born overseas). Further, even as an almost 5-year-old Gemma understood that her home language was used only *"in my family"* while English (her second language) was used in contexts outside the home. For example, at the supported playgroup Gemma and her mother only spoke English together even though her mother reported mostly speaking Singhalese to Gemma at home.

### **Summary of Supported Playgroup Children's Perceptions of Everyday Home Life**

Supported playgroup children's perceptions of everyday home and family life were captured in Domestic Workload, Connectedness, and Structure of the Home Environment.

Supported playgroup children perceived a dichotomy between the role of mothers (domestic tasks) and the role of fathers ('outside the home' employment) in the home context. Children were also involved in domestic duties at home and Gemma expressed pride in her growing independence. The connectedness of supported playgroup families was sometimes influenced by complexities in certain family relationships. This was particularly the case for sibling relationships. Siblings were the main play partners of supported playgroup children but this relationship was impacted by tension and conflict. Tangible everyday interactions expressed connectedness in the parent-child dyad, however at times, perceptions of parent availability created moments of loneliness in Gemma's everyday home life (e.g., playing alone). Children's descriptions suggested that, on occasion, families used meal times as opportunities to reconnect and share experiences and events from their day (although this was only evident at Phase 1). Furthermore, home learning activities (e.g., story-telling and book reading) were a part of the structure of the home environment of supported playgroup children. Lastly, cultural diversity was present in supported playgroup families, although only Gemma conveyed a sense of this suggesting a blend of two cultures.

**Change over time in children's perceptions.** The supported playgroup delivered more universal and less intensive parenting support than the parenting program in the current research. However, some elements of the supported playgroup program aimed to promote change within families (e.g., provided play and learning experiences that were easily replicable in the home context to support parent-child play and promote children's learning). For this reason, it was anticipated that supported playgroup children's perceptions of everyday home life would change in some measure, particularly in relation to parent-child play, over the research period although not to the same extent as for parenting program children.

Change was described by supported playgroup children in some aspects of their home life. However, this change usually became less favourable over time from the children's perspectives. This was particularly true for Gemma. During Phases 2 and 3, conflict with her sister and the unavailability of her parents (and sister) to play with her suggested changes in the connectedness of Gemma's relationship with her family. In addition, reconnecting as a family at meal times did not appear to be a meaningful part of the daily routines of both Gemma's and Catherine's families after Phase 1.

### **Preschool Children's Perceptions of Everyday Home Life**

Analysis of the preschool children's interviews about their everyday life at home brought a number of themes to light. The themes fell within the Domestic Workload, Connectedness, and Friendship Networks ecocultural constructs. Themes within these constructs were present in at least half of the 10 preschool children's interviews and were significant issues raised over the three phase of the research. Two minor themes emerged in relation to Connectedness and Structure of the Home Environment. These themes reflected important aspects of everyday home and family life of a small number of preschool children.

#### **Domestic Workload**

This construct explored children's perceptions of parents' involvement in domestic duties and day-to-day caregiving tasks as well as children helping at home and taking care of themselves.

**Mothers and fathers help at home but fathers also go to work.** Over the three phases of research, preschool children considered their mothers as the parent who helped them with certain aspects of everyday home life, including getting dressed (*"She helps me get dressed"* – Molly), organising meals (*"My mummy helps make dinner"* – Scarlett), and preparing for bed (*"Mummy helps me get ready for bed"* – Natalie). Some preschool children

also described their fathers as helpers though this was usually in relation to helping organise meals. For example, when asked about who helped him getting ready in the morning, Noah explained, *“My dad ... [He] makes me toast or porridge or cereal or cereal and Weetbix or nothing else.”* Other children talked about their fathers as the parent who goes to work (e.g., *“He’s got so much meetings”* – Sarah and *“My dad goes out to work”* – Sean).

**Helping at home.** The tasks or jobs completed by preschool children at home demonstrated the practical ways they provided help in the everyday lives of their families. The tasks ranged from helping their parents prepare dinner (*“I sometimes help. Mum tells me what to do”* – Noah and *“I make some cake for dessert”* – Sarah), to setting the table for dinner (*“I set the table”* – Theo), to cleaning their bedrooms (*“...like clean up your room”* – Theo). Other children spoke specifically about their part in caring for the family pets. At Phase 1, Noah talked about his *“super-duper fluffy”* rabbit and explained *“We take him out and give him lots of cuddles and take him on the road. We have a leash for him.”* During Phase 3, Hugh declared, *“I actually look after the cat ... I’m actually both of their dads, both of the dogs and one of the cats”* and Theo spoke about caring for his family’s pet parrot (*“When it’s daddy’s and my day, I always feed him”*).

Hugh also helped his mother with his baby sibling. Hugh, whose parents had separated during Phase 1, talked about how he looked after his baby sister so his mother could have a shower: *“Well, she [mother] goes in the shower ... [and] I feed her, my sister, or I play with her.”* During the later stages of research (after his father resumed living in the family home) Hugh did not talk about helping his mother with his baby sister.

**Taking care of myself.** Over the research period, the preschool children talked about different self-care tasks they completed independently (or with limited parental assistance). These tasks usually involved getting dressed (*“I dress myself”* – Michelle) and preparing



breakfast (*"I know how to make breakfast"* – Theo). Independence in taking care of oneself was not always viewed positively and had its drawbacks. During an interview at Phase 3 Sarah, who had previously mentioned getting herself dressed each morning, admitted she disliked doing this by herself sometimes. She explained, *"Because I have to like, do it myself ... And sometimes I have to get dresses from the wardrobe and I can't even reach it ... I feel angry."* During Phase 3, this theme was only present in two out of the 10 preschool children's interviews.

### **Connectedness**

Connectedness developed as a very important construct in preschool children's interviews. There were many references to connectedness in children's relationships with parents and siblings, particularly surrounding play and meal times. However, at times, feelings of connectedness in certain relationships (mostly with parents) were influenced by parental absence.

**Playing with parents lots.** Seven of the 10 child participants who attended the preschool spoke about playing with their parents at home at some stage of the research. Over the duration of the research there appeared to be a shift in the parent nominated as a play partner. Of the four preschool children who reported playing with their father (rather than their mother) during Phase 1, three of these reported also playing with their mother or both parents during Phases 2 and 3. Two more children identified playing with both of their parents during the later stages of the research and another young girl identified her mother as a play partner during Phase 2.

**Father-child play.** The children spoke about engaging with their fathers in stimulating, physical, and playful activities. For example, during Phase 1 three preschool boys spoke about roughhousing (rumbling or wrestling), outdoor physical play (cricket and soccer),

and motion-controlled, active electronic games (e.g., Wii games) they played with their fathers. One girl also reported playing the singing and action game ‘Kangaroo, Skippyroo’ on the trampoline with her father. Similar stories were shared by the children during Phases 2 and 3. The following quotes demonstrate the types of games or activities children engaged in with their fathers:

*With daddy playing soccer (Theo)*

*And sometimes I hold hands with [father] and bounce like this and say ‘One, Two, Three’ and he lifts us in the sky (Sarah)*

*Rumbles with daddy (Hugh)*

Two preschool children also spoke about playing board games with their fathers. For example, Noah commented, “...*This morning I just played chess with him*” and Theo said, “*Well, me and daddy play a fun game of Uno.*” Theo and his father also engaged in joint construction activities as Theo explained, “*I like playing with my new Lego [with dad].*”

Compared to the other preschool children, Theo spoke more often about playing with his father. Theo was cared for by his father one day per week while his mother was at work and his older siblings were at school (“...*me and daddy stay home once in a week*”). It was evident that Theo loved these one-on-one interactions with his father and within his own family this special father-son day was even given a pet name<sup>13</sup>.

***Mother-child play.*** While one boy, Theo, commented that he loved “...*when mummy plays with me*” during Phase 1, mother-child play was mostly only reported during Phase 2 and by only three of the ten preschool children. For example, during this research phase Natalie spoke about her mother helping her with craft at home. Interestingly, during Phase 2

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<sup>13</sup> The term ‘pet name’ has been used instead of providing the actual name to ensure anonymity and to protect the child’s and his family’s identities.

the two preschool boys who spoke about playing with their mothers identified playing physical or active games similar to those played with their fathers although this play did not involve the roughhousing commonly reported with fathers. For example, Theo played hide and seek with his mother, and Hugh and his mother practised doing cartwheels together.

***Playing with both parents.*** During the research, four of the ten preschool children also reported playing with both parents although this was not consistent across the three phases of research. One boy talked in Phase 1 about how he loved playing dinosaur games with his family. When questioned about what they did during the day, Molly (Phase 2) commented, “*I get to play with mummy and daddy*” and Sean (Phase 3) spoke about playing racing cars with his parents.

***Playing with siblings lots.*** When questioned about who they played with at home, preschool children (nine out of 10) more often mentioned siblings than parents as play partners within the home environment. Birth order did not appear to influence whether preschool children nominated their siblings as play partners, as play opportunities were linked with both older and younger siblings.

Preschool children identified the different games, toys, and activities they played with their siblings such as hide-and-seek, jumping on the trampoline together, and playing Barbies or racing cars. Other children spoke about playing more structured games such as Twister or chess (“*I just play chess with my brother*” – Noah), playing electronic games on consoles (e.g., Wii or Nintendo DS), or playing games based on favourite television shows or movies. For example, Noah spoke about playing Star Wars Lego with his older siblings and his brother had given him “*five cards ... [so they could] play Yu-Gi-Oh.*” However, Michelle sometimes did not like playing with her older siblings because “*Jessica [older sister] and Bryce [older brother] keep annoying me.*”

Two preschool children, Sarah and Hugh, described making up games to play with their baby siblings. While Sarah's sibling was still in-utero, she commented: "*[I play] mermaids in the sea, that's a game of mine [I play with] my sister which is in my mummy's tummy.*" Hugh, the other child made up a game called 'Baby Town' to play with his baby sister where "*we just high five on each other.*"

**Playing alone when parents are working.** Playing alone emerged as a minor theme for a small number of children. For these children playing alone meant not playing with their parents (these children were also unable to play with siblings during the weekdays as their siblings were at school). During Phase 2, two children said that the reason they played alone sometimes was because their parents were not available due to work commitments ("*Cause daddy does work then*" – Theo and "*Sometimes she's doing work on the computer*" – Natalie).

**Family meals are a time to talk and share.** This theme focused on family meal times and the interactions that occurred between family members around the dinner table. At Phase 1, eight of the 10 preschool children reported eating dinner together as a family. Some of these children were also able to describe the family interactions that took place during this time. Theo explained, "*[We say] nice things about [our] day*" while other children reported singing songs or playing games with their families. Slightly fewer children (six during Phase 2 and five during Phase 3) spoke about shared meal times during the later stages of the research. Some of these children were unable to provide an answer when asked about the things their families talked about or reported that their families did not talk during dinner time. However, family interactions during dinner, similar to those in Phase 1, were reported by other children during Phases 2 and 3. These included talking about the day's events and "*...telling jokes and stuff*" (Sarah).

One child, Hugh, shared quite a different perspective on family meal times when his parents were separated in Phase 1. Hugh spoke about eating dinner in a separate area of the house from his mother. When asked why he thought this happened he said, *“Because we don’t really, we don’t want to sit together sometimes.”* In contrast, later in the same conversation Hugh spoke more enthusiastically about dinner time with his father. From Hugh’s descriptions there appeared to be more connectedness and feelings of being part of a family when he was with his father. His father would *“...make yummy dinners”* and even though his father did not have a dining table, they would *“...just sit down on the lounge and watch [television]”* and eat dinner together. After his parents reunited, Hugh spoke about sharing meal times with his family and *“...talking about dinosaurs.”*

**Loving moments between parents and children.** This theme captured children’s perceptions of connectedness in the parent-child relationship, including expressions of love and affection between parents and children. During Phase 1, seven of the 10 preschool children reported moments of affection or love with a parent. Parental affection was particularly evident in children’s descriptions of bedtime routines. For example, Caleb said, *“Hugs before bed, they [parents] hug me and get me into bed”*. Another boy, Noah spoke affectionately about his bedtime routine with his father:

*He cuddles me and kisses me. He tickles me. We play tickling games. Dad is so ticklish. His armpits are ticklish. Sometimes I sleep on the couch and then dad picks me up and carries me to bed.*

Similar expressions of love and affection were described by the preschool children during the later stages of the research. Theo, for example, admitted to sneaking into his parents’ bedroom at night to *“cuddle them.”*

During Phase 1 two preschool children also made comments about loving their parents although interestingly this was only in relation to their fathers. One of these children, Hugh, who lived mostly with his mother after his parents separated explained, *“I like painting daddies. I love him.”* While the preschool children did not explicitly state they loved their mothers, five of the 10 children spoke about favourite activities they did with their mothers or the special things they loved most about their mothers. These were mostly related to the children’s perceptions of the practical or pragmatic ways their mothers made them feel loved. For example, during a conversation about baking with her mother, Sarah said, *“I help stir and then my mum lets me lick the whisk”* and Hugh remarked, *“I love when my mummy puts the password into the computer.”*

Practical and concrete displays of love and affection were also described by two of the preschool children during the later stages of the research. At Phase 2, Noah talked about his parents making him milkshakes *“because my mummy and daddy love me so much”* and at Phase 3 Sarah told how her *“...daddy snuck out of work ... cause he wanted to be with his kids.”*

Throughout the research, a few children expressed sadness when parent-child closeness was difficult due to parental absence. For example, during Phase 3 Molly expressed sadness because her mother had travelled overseas for a holiday: *“She makes me happy and I miss her lots ... she’s going to go away for like a hundred million days.”* Parent-child closeness was also impacted by parental separation. This emerged during conversations with Hugh and is discussed next.

**Missing dad when parents separate.** Of the 10 children from the preschool group, one child (Hugh) was from a family in which the parents had separated. While Hugh lived mostly with his mother, he did have regular contact with his father. Hugh shared his thoughts

on how life had changed since his parents had separated. At Phase 1 Hugh spoke about missing his father and described how some things were different because “*dad’s gone.*” One difference Hugh identified was his bedtime routine: “*I used to [do rumbles before bed] but now I can’t because dad’s gone.*” During Phase 2, Hugh’s parents had reunited and his father had resumed living in the family home. While Hugh was happy about being able to rumble with his father before bed each night, he expressed hurt and frustration that his parents continued to fight: “*They said they wouldn’t fight ever again! But they still do ... It seems a bit like a lie.*”

### **Friendship Networks**

Children’s participation in friendship networks as a part of everyday home and family life was captured in this construct.

**Preschool friends coming to play.** Preschool children (five out of 10) talked about friends coming to play at their homes and this was fairly consistently mentioned by the same five children at each stage of the research. These friends were usually other children from the same preschool. For example, at Phase 1 Sarah spoke about “*playing the Wii with [her] brother and all of [her] friends*” and at Phase 3 she reported playing Star Wars games with her friends. Noah talked about playing with his friends at home at each stage of the research and explained how play dates worked within his friendship group: “*I’m allowed to come over [to] theirs or they come over to ours. James [preschool friend] comes over to mine.*”

### **Structure of the Home Environment**

The construct explored children’s perspectives of learning activities within the home context. A minor theme that focused on shared book reading emerged from preschool children’s interviews.

**Shared book reading.** Over the three phases of research, four of the 10 preschool children spoke about shared book reading within the home context. Book reading was often a parent-child activity that usually occurred as part of the bedtime routine. For example, Theo explained that either *“mum or dad ... read me a book”* before bed, and when discussing his bedtime routine, Hugh said, *“...me and dad have a book.”* At other times, different family members engaged in shared book reading with the children. At Phase 2, when asked again about bedtime, Theo said, *“Sometimes my brother and sister get to read to me.”* Sarah’s grandfather sometimes read her a story though she also explained that she could read stories herself *“because I can read ‘Hop on Pop’.”* Shared book reading was also viewed by one child as a family activity. When asked about what happens during the day at home, Sean (Sarah’s younger brother) identified *“reading books ... [with] mum and dad and Sarah and baby.”*

### **Summary of Preschool Children’s Perceptions of Everyday Home Life**

Most themes that emerged from preschool children’s perceptions of everyday home life were encompassed within the ecocultural constructs of Domestic Workload, Connectedness, and Friendship Networks. Mothers and fathers were both involved in day-to-day caregiving tasks although fathers were perceived also as working outside of the home. Preschool children were involved in domestic duties/chores and demonstrated independence in taking care of themselves. Children’s descriptions of home life suggested a strong sense of connectedness within preschool families. Connectedness in parent-child relationships was supported through play and love and affection. However, parental separation or absence impacted on parent-child closeness and caused sadness in some children’s lives. Relationships with siblings were almost always positive and siblings were important and main play partners in the home context. Furthermore, shared meal times appeared to provide opportunities for family members to reconnect and enjoy each other’s company. Friendship networks were also



a part of everyday home life for half of the preschool children. Lastly, learning activities such as book reading was an important structure of the home environment for some preschool children.

**Changes over time in children's perceptions.** The preschool provided an early education and care program rather than parenting support. Thus, promoting change within families was not an intentional focus of the preschool. The preschool children had been chosen as a comparison group as it was anticipated that family life would be fairly stable for this group of children. As expected, preschool children's descriptions of their everyday home life reflected little change over the three phases of research. Significant changes, however, were evident in Hugh's perceptions of everyday home life, especially in relation to his parents' separation and reunion during the research period. Hugh's experiences were unique within this group and provided interesting and divergent perspectives of everyday home life for preschool children.

### **Comparison of Children's Perceptions of Everyday Home Life**

Similarities and differences in perceptions of everyday home life existed across the three groups of children. While some common themes emerged during the ecocultural interviews, others were only significant themes for particular groups of children. The next section provides a comparison of children's perceptions of everyday home life within the relevant ecocultural construct. Changes over time in children's descriptions and how these differed between the three programs are also discussed.

### **Domestic Workload**

Mothers were involved in day-to-day caregiving tasks in all families across the three programs. Differences existed in the level of involvement in domestic duties of fathers. Preschool children more often than parenting program and supported playgroup children

perceived their fathers as being involved in some way with household tasks. However, fathers (and not mothers) were spoken about primarily as the parent who worked outside the home.

Children were also involved in helping at home. Preschool and supported playgroup children talked about specific chores or tasks that were their responsibilities in the home context. On the other hand, parenting program children very rarely spoke about this. The only mention was at Phase 3 when Alfie said *"I help my mummy load up the car."* However, this is not to say that parenting program children did not help at home, only that this theme was not brought to light during their interviews over the research period.

Autonomy in self-care tasks suggested a sense of independence in children. This emerged as a theme during interviews with Claire (parenting program), Gemma (supported playgroup) and most preschool children. As Claire and Gemma were the oldest children in their respective groups and preschool children were, on average, the oldest of the three groups, the emergence of this theme during some interviews and not others suggests it may have been related more to age of child than any factor in the home environment.

### **Connectedness**

The connectedness of the families was brought to light during children's interviews. Connectedness was explored through family relationships and parts of the daily routine that fostered (or hindered) a sense of connectedness at home. Connectedness was reflected in children's perspectives from all programs although daily routines and activities supported this better in some families than other.

Differences in the parent-child dyad were noticeable between the three groups. Most preschool children saw parents as play partners and enjoyed the games they played together. However, this differed from parenting program and supported playgroup children's reports. Connecting with their parents through play emerged as a theme for some parenting program

children but supported playgroup children only mentioned parent-child play in one-off comments (e.g., Catherine said, “*Mummy [play with] play dough*” during Phase 2). This limited mention of parent-child play was unexpected based on activities of the parenting program and supported playgroup (e.g., modelling appropriate parent-child play, and offering age-appropriate play experiences parents could replicate at home).

Connectedness in the parent-child dyad was also expressed through tangible moments of love and affection between parents and children. Preschool and supported playgroup children shared examples of these loving moments throughout the research period, and these moments were meaningful to children’s experiences of everyday home life. In contrast, no child who attended the parenting program spoke about love and affection or moments of connectedness within the parent-child relationship. This was unexpected for a few reasons. First, based on the focus of the parenting program (promoting positive parent-child relationships and secure parent-child attachment), it was anticipated that this theme would emerge at least during later research phases for parenting program children. Second, the researcher observed mothers hugging and kissing their children or telling them they loved them when at the parenting program. Thus, it was interesting that even when children might be expected to describe moments of parent-child affection (such as a goodnight kiss), parenting program children did not.

On the other hand, relationships with siblings presented a common thread in interviews between children across the three programs. Siblings played a key role in children’s experiences of their everyday home life as they were important and primary play partners at home. Difficulties or frustrations within sibling relationships were very rarely discussed by parenting program and preschool children. However, siblings were sources of conflict and tension for supported playgroup children at home and this adversely influenced the sibling relationship.

Shared meal times also presented a point of difference in the connectedness of families. Families from all programs shared meals together, especially dinner. Preschool children's reports (and supported playgroup children's reports at Phase 1) suggested meal times were viewed as opportunities to foster family connections and share the day's experiences. In contrast, meal times were quiet times to eat in parenting program families.

### **Friendship Networks**

Friendship networks were a part of parenting program and preschool children's experiences of home life during the research. This was in contrast to supported playgroup children who very rarely spoke about friends in the home context.

### **Structure of the Home Environment**

Learning activities at home (e.g., story-telling and book reading) were a significant part of supported playgroup children's perspectives of home life. This was also the case for some children who attended the preschool. While the researcher observed children at the parenting program looking through books (and shared book reading, usually between staff and children, sometimes occurred at the parenting program) this was not an activity that the children talked about as happening at home. The absence of this theme from parenting program children's accounts does not necessarily mean that books and shared reading were not part of their routines at home. Rather, this theme simply may not have held as much importance for these children as it did for supported playgroup and preschool children.

### **Changes over Time in Children's Perceptions of Everyday Home Life**

As identified earlier, aims of the parenting program, and to some extent, the supported playgroup were directed towards facilitating and supporting change within families. With this in mind, it was expected that some aspects of children's descriptions of their everyday home life would change over the three phases of research. This was particularly true for children

who attended the parenting program. Overall, children's descriptions from all three programs (especially the preschool) remained fairly stable from Phase 1 to Phase 3 with little change being identified in the ways children perceived their everyday home life.

Even so, change was found in perceptions of everyday home life for some parenting program and supported playgroup children. Parenting program children described positive changes (e.g., increased play with parents) that were related to the program's aims and outcomes such as supporting parent-child relationships through promoting positive parent-child play interactions. On the other hand, changes in supported playgroup children's perceptions of everyday home life were not as positive. These changes reflected perceived difficulties in family relationships (e.g., sibling conflict) and parental unavailability.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented findings in relation to home and family life during program participation. Data gathered from children and their mothers provided an interesting and varied picture of home life for families across the three programs. Children's experiences of home life appeared to be quite different depending on the program they attended.

Over the research period, it appeared life may have become more stable for parenting program families as more than half of the mothers reported no major life events at Phase 3. While, on average, the home environments of parenting program families remained in the 'at-risk' category, some parenting program mothers reported positive changes to aspects of the home environment during program involvement. This finding suggested these particular families were making positive changes to the structure of the home particularly in relation to factors associated with a child's growth and development. This change, however, was not found in children's narratives (themes related to the structure of the home environment). Even so, other positive changes to the parent-child relationship (increased parent-child play

interactions) and friendship networks were described by parenting program children over the research period. However, connectedness in the parent-child relationship (particularly expressions of love and affection) was mentioned less often by parenting program children when compared to the other groups of children.

In general, preschool children's accounts (and to some extent supported playgroup children's accounts) suggested home was a place families spend time together, talking, playing, and helping each other. These children also recognised connectedness in the parent-child dyad through their parents' daily actions (showing affection or doing 'special' things for them). Certain reported activities or routines (books and shared reading) also suggested that the structure of the home environment supported preschool and supported playgroup children's learning and development at home. This conclusion was supported by results based on the measure of the home environment (HSQ) for most of these families, particularly preschool families.

A key aim of the parenting program was to support and promote secure attachments between parents and children. To this end, changes in children's narrative representations of their attachment relationships were also explored in the current research. The results of children's attachment story completions are discussed in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **RESULTS: CHILDREN'S NARRATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF THEIR ATTACHMENT RELATIONSHIPS**

This chapter presents the results from children's responses to the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT), a projective instrument designed to elicit young children's representations of their attachment relationships and caregiving environment. The ASCT was included due to the parenting program's theoretical underpinnings in attachment theory and the program's focus on developing secure attachments between parents and their children. In the current study, children completed the ASCT at Phases 1 and 3. Completion of the ASCT at these two time points was designed to document any change in the children's narrative attachment representations during program participation. It was expected that when compared with Phase 1, parenting program children's story stem responses at Phase 3 would reflect some positive change in attachment representations. Due to no specific program emphasis on attachment in the supported playgroup and preschool, the narrative representations of children from these settings were expected to remain stable between Phases 1 and 3.

As explained in more detail in Chapter 4 (Methodology) the children's narratives were coded using a two-step approach. First, each of the story stems was coded for story themes using level I content codes. The codes included dyadic interactions (e.g., parent nurture and caregiving) and individual attributes (e.g., child's autonomous behaviour). Second, each child was given a rating (1-7) for each of the three level II process scales (exploration/sociability, attachment, and caregiving). These ratings were based on the story themes identified and a judgment of the quality of the process scale constructs across all the stories. The scores for each of the level II process scales were the scores used in data analysis.

In this chapter, child characteristics that may be associated with ASCT narrative responses are reported first followed by the results from the ASCT measure over time (by

research phase). Verbatim excerpts of children's narrative responses are provided to illustrate differences in the stories told by the children when a significant difference was found in the analysis.

### **Child Characteristics**

Child characteristics analysed in relation to the ASCT were child age at Phase 1 and Phase 3, and their score on the PPVT-4 (used as a measure of receptive vocabulary as well as an index of verbal comprehension). Distributions of these variables are shown in Table 7.1. Data is missing for two preschool children, as they chose not to complete the ASCT at both Phases 1 and 3. PPVT-4 data is missing for two parenting program children as they did not complete this measure because their mothers had disengaged from the program at the time children completed the PPVT-4. Inspection of Table 7.1 indicates that parenting program children were on average the youngest (Phase 1:  $M=3.86$  years; Phase 3:  $M=4.44$  years), and had the lowest mean PPVT-4 score ( $M=93.00$ ) of the three program groups (parenting program, supported playgroup and preschool).



Table 7.1

*Distribution of Age of Child and PPVT-4 Scores by Program*

	Parenting Program	Supported Playgroup	Preschool
Age (years) at Phase 1			
N	5	2	8
<i>M (SD)</i>	3.86 (0.58)	4.03 (0.66)	4.61 (0.50)
<i>Mdn</i>	3.61	4.03	4.73
Range	3.36 – 4.81	3.54 – 4.51	3.56 – 5.06
Age (years) at Phase 3			
N	5	2	8
<i>M (SD)</i>	4.44 (0.62)	4.66 (0.69)	5.09 (0.50)
<i>Mdn</i>	4.10	4.66	5.21
Range	3.99 – 5.44	4.17 – 5.14	4.04 – 5.54
PPVT-4			
N	3	2	8
<i>M (SD)</i>	93.00 (6.08)	107.00 (7.08)	110.50 (14.13)
<i>Mdn</i>	90.00	107.00	110.50
Range	89 – 100	102 – 112	91 – 131

Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed to determine if there were significant differences in median age at Phases 1 and 3 and in median PPVT scores for children in the three programs.<sup>14</sup> Results indicated that there were no significant differences<sup>15</sup> in median child age at Phase 1 between the programs,  $\chi^2(2) = 4.84$ ,  $p = .082$ , or at Phase 3,  $\chi^2(2) = 3.99$ ,  $p = .135$ . Further, there were no significant differences in the median PPVT scores,  $\chi^2(2) = 4.12$ ,  $p = 0.128$ , between the parenting program, supported playgroup and preschool children. Due to timing constraints in data collection, there was a shorter period of time between Phase 1 and Phase 3 data collection of the ASCT for the preschool children (compared to parenting program children) which slightly reduced the age difference between parenting program and preschool children. Even so, the findings suggest children from the three programs did not

<sup>14</sup> Medians, rather than means, are reported as the non-parametric tests used are based on medians.

<sup>15</sup> Results are based on the exact significance, rather than the asymptotic significance due to the small sample sizes.

differ significantly in relation to age and receptive vocabulary, two of the key variables that might impact on any program differences in ASCT responses.

### **Attachment Story Completion Task Results: Phase 1**

This section examines results from the ASCT at Phase 1. First, level I content codes applied to children's story stems are discussed followed by an analysis of level II process scales.

#### **Level I Content Codes**

The most frequently applied ASCT level I content codes for each program at Phase 1 are presented in Table 7.2. It is important to note that this table does not provide the full range of level I content codes (16 in total). Some codes were not applied to any story stem (e.g., parent hostility/harsh discipline/aggression/abusive towards child) or were only applied once or twice during coding (e.g., child-child hostility). These codes were not included in Table 7.2. Other codes frequently applied to only one particular group of children were included to show differences in the story themes (e.g., dyadic interactions including parental nurture, role-reversal and attachment behaviours as well as individual attributes such as child autonomous behaviour) across the three programs. Level I content codes are reported in descriptive terms only (level II process scales were the variables used in the analysis as per Page's (2007) coding manual) and they provide an interesting contrast between the types of stories told by children from each of the programs.

Table 7.2

*Most Frequently Applied ASCT Level I Content Codes by Program at Phase 1*

	Parenting Program		Supported Playgroup		Preschool	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Total number of coded representations	58		17		75	
Child autonomous behaviour	3	5.2	2	11.7	15	20.0
Unresolved child vulnerability	7	12.0	-	-	5	6.7
Child-child empathy/caregiving	-	-	3	17.6	2	2.7
Attachment behaviour	5	8.6	1	5.9	15	20.0
Child-parent role reversal	4	6.9	-	-	-	-
Parent-child nurture/caregiving/protection	5	8.6	5	29.4	18	24.0
Parent as powerful/very competent/high status	3	5.2	-	-	2	2.7
Unresolved parent vulnerability	14	24.1	-	-	3	4.0
Pleasant family interaction/activity	2	3.4	6	35.3	8	10.7
Distortions of narrative/odd/intrusive/frightening imagery	8	13.8	-	-	4	5.3
Other	7	12.0	-	-	3	4.0

As shown in Table 7.2, unresolved parent vulnerability (e.g., parents being killed by ‘baddies’) and unresolved child vulnerability (e.g., children being hit by a car) were frequent themes in the parenting program children’s story responses. Parenting program children’s stories also often contained odd, frightening or distorted narratives (e.g., all family members being eaten by dinosaurs). Supported playgroup children’s stories more often reflected parent-child nurture and caregiving (e.g., parent applied a band-aid to the child’s hurt knee), pleasant

family interactions (e.g., the family went on a trip together), and child-child empathy (e.g., siblings played together). Attachment behaviour was not a prominent theme in the supported playgroup children's story responses even when it would be expected such as in the departure/reunion story. In contrast, preschool children's stories did contain elements of attachment related behaviour. The most frequently applied content codes for preschool children were child autonomous behaviour (e.g., cleaning up the spilled juice), attachment behaviour (e.g., child approached parents upon return from trip), and parent-child nurture and caregiving (e.g., parent applied a band-aid to the child's hurt knee).

**Avoidance and coherence.** Narrative responses to each story stem were also coded for avoidance of story elements and overall story coherence in the initial phase of coding even though these are not level I content codes in themselves. Story stems were only coded for avoidance when needed. When no significant avoidance was observed, no rating was given (this is the default rating for this code). A higher percentage of parenting program children's stories (80%) received a rating for avoidance, due mainly to significant avoidance in the story representations or no/minimal story resolution. Avoidance was coded in 60% and 50% of supported playgroup and preschool children's stories respectively. The rating on the avoidance code contributed towards the child's rating on the level II attachment system process scale.

In relation to coherence, 72% of parenting program children's stories received a score of 1 for coherence (each story stem was rated on a three-point scale with 3, the highest coherence rating, reflecting a positive, logical, and compact story). Parenting program children's narrative responses tended to be frightening and/or chaotic with numerous negative representations of parental caregiving. In contrast, only 10% of supported playgroup children's stories and 12.5% of preschool children's stories were given a score of 1 for

coherence. The coherence rating contributed towards the child's rating on the level II caregiving system process scale.

### **Level II Process Scales**

Descriptive statistics for the ASCT level II process scales for each program at Phase 1 are presented in Table 7.3. As explained previously, the ratings (scores) of the level II process scales are based on the level I content codes and a rating of the overall effect of the quality of the process scale constructs present across all story stems. Each level II process scale was coded on a 7-point scale, with a rating of 1 being the lowest (predominant representations of the negative dimensions of the process scales reflected across the story stems) and a rating of 7 being the highest (representations that primarily encompass positive dimensions of the process scales reflected across the story stems). Each child received a separate score (1 to 7) for each level II process scale. Table 7.3 shows that parenting program children had the lowest median scores of the three programs across the three level II process scales (attachment, caregiving, and exploration/sociability) during Phase 1. Median scores for the level II process scales were similar for supported playgroup and preschool children and higher than those for the parenting program children.

Table 7.3

*Descriptive Statistics for ASCT Level II Process Scales by Program at Phase 1*

	Parenting Program	Supported Playgroup	Preschool
N	5	2	8
Attachment			
<i>Mdn</i>	1.00	2.50	3.00
<i>M (SD)</i>	1.40 (0.89)	2.50 (0.71)	3.25 (1.04)
Caregiving			
<i>Mdn</i>	1.00	3.50	3.00
<i>M (SD)</i>	1.60 (0.89)	3.50 (2.12)	3.38 (0.92)
Exploration/Sociability			
<i>Mdn</i>	2.00	4.50	4.50
<i>M (SD)</i>	2.40 (1.52)	4.50 (0.71)	4.25 (1.28)

Results from a Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a significant difference in median attachment scores across the three programs,  $\chi^2(2) = 6.93, p = .018$ . A significant difference in median caregiving scale scores was also found between the three programs,  $\chi^2(2) = 6.35, p = .025$ . To identify where these significant differences existed, post-hoc analysis was completed using Mann-Whitney U tests for each pairwise comparison (parenting program/supported playgroup, parenting program/preschool, and supported playgroup/preschool). A Bonferroni correction was made for multiple comparisons with the adjusted significance level being  $p < .017$ .

Attachment scores for parenting program children and preschool children were found to be significantly different,  $U = 3.50, z = -2.492, p = .012$ , with preschool children being scored significantly higher for attachment than parenting program children. Similarly, caregiving scores for parenting program children and preschool children were found to be significantly different,  $U = 3.50, z = -2.507, p = .016$ , with preschool children being scored significantly higher for caregiving than parenting program children. While there was no

significant difference between parenting program and preschool children in exploration/sociability at Phase 1,  $U = 6.50$ ,  $z = -2.021$ ,  $p = .047$ , the direction was for preschool children's exploration/sociability scores to be higher than parenting program children's exploration/sociability scores. No significant differences in ASCT scores were identified between parenting program and the supported playgroup children or between the supported playgroup and the preschool children.

**Qualitative data.** Verbatim excerpts of two children's narratives are presented to illustrate the significant differences found between parenting program and preschool children's story responses. It should be noted that not all preschool children provided appropriate story resolutions and some preschool children were rated low (2-3) on the ASCT process scales. However, four of the five parenting program children were rated low to very low (1 or 2) on the ASCT process scales at Phase 1 and most parenting program children told stories that lacked coherency, were odd, and involved parent and child unresolved vulnerability. The narratives presented are from Alfie (parenting program) and Molly (preschool). Alfie was rated very low (1) on all of the ASCT scales while Molly was rated moderately (5) on the scales.

The children's responses to the Monster in the Bedroom story (the third story presented) are provided for comparison purposes. The props for this story include a bed and family figures (mother, father and two siblings). The story begins with the mother telling the child to go to bed. The child agrees and goes to the bedroom. The child then cries out "There's a monster in my room! There's a monster in my room!" The expected response for this story involves an enactment of attachment behaviour of the child towards a parent (such as the child moving towards the mother), and for a family member to provide reassurance/comfort to the child. In the excerpt, 'R' stands for researcher.

***Alfie's response to the Monster in the Bedroom story.***

Alfie: [Uses his hand to imitate a dinosaur walking across the table while making dinosaur sounds. He makes a quiet screaming noise and moves the family members across the table]. *The dinosaur ...* [It is unclear what else is said]. *The dinosaur wants to eat the daddy. Now he's in bed.* [Places the boy in the bed].

R: *He's in the bed?*

Alfie: *Yep.* [It is unclear what else is said]. *Outside.* [Tries to put all the family members into the bed but they keep falling out]. *Bleh.* [Uses hand to imitate a dinosaur walking and moves the family members about with his hand while making a sucking sound]. *Bleh, bleh, bleh.*

R: *What's just happened?*

Alfie: *Now they're all dead.*

R: *They're all dead?*

Alfie: *He ate the daddy.*

***Molly's response to the Monster in the Bedroom story.***

Molly: *And then she says, "There's no monsters."*

R: *Who said, "There's no monsters?"*

Molly: *Yeah, and then she went to bed.* [Moves the girl over to the bed]. *And then she said, "Mummy, there's a monster!"* [Moves girl out of bed and over to the mother. Pauses. Looks at R]. *Then the boy went over and went to sleep.*



[Moves boy over to the bed and places him into the bed]. *Then she went to sleep in her bed.* [Takes the boy out and puts the girl in].

R: *Does anything happen with the monster?*

Molly: *And then, um the monster went away.* [Moves boy to the mother and father.

Moves mother over to the girl in the bed]. *Then she said, "It's morning."*

[Mother gets the girl out of the bed]. *And then she said, "Good morning."*

[Moves mother and girl over to the father and boy]. *The end.*

Alfie presented a compact but avoidant response to this story stem. The introduction of the dinosaur was intrusive, unexpected and frightening leading to an overall sense of fear and family vulnerability (there were several enactments of defensive family huddling). In this story, the father was presented as being particularly vulnerable. Further, instead of providing reassurance to the children, the parents were unable to protect their children from the monster (dinosaur). In this way, the children were also depicted as vulnerable.

In contrast, Molly's story was more logical and positive although the researcher needed to prompt<sup>16</sup> Molly to refocus her attention on the story issue. Molly enacted attachment behaviour with the child seeking out the mother. However, it was unclear whether the mother removed the monster from the bedroom or the monster simply went away. The mother was later depicted in a caregiving role as she helped the girl out of bed. While Molly's response did not provide the optimal resolution for this story, it presented a contrast to Alfie's response.

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<sup>16</sup> The researcher is permitted to prompt children during administration of the ASCT. Prompts (similar to the one used with Molly) are designed to focus the children's attention on the issue if it has not been addressed (e.g., 'What do they do about the monster in the room?'). Other prompts can be used to clarify ambiguous actions of the figures (e.g., 'What are they doing?'), verification of actions or statements (e.g., 'The mummy scared the monster away?'), and to elicit a further response (e.g., 'Anything else?').

### **Attachment Story Completion Task Results: Phase 3**

At Phase 3 it was expected that parenting program children's story stem responses would reflect some change with more positive and appropriate attachment representations being present than at Phase 1. It was also expected that supported playgroup and preschool children's ASCT results would remain stable between Phases 1 and 3 as these programs did not have a specific focus on improving parent-child attachment.

#### **Level I Content Codes**

The ASCT level I content codes most frequently applied to the children's story responses at Phase 3 are presented in Table 7.4. At Phase 3, parent-child nurture and caregiving was the most frequently applied level I code for all programs, unlike at Phase 1 in which this only applied to the supported playgroup and preschool children. At Phase 3 parenting program children's stories were coded more frequently for attachment behaviour (13.5% of the total number of coded representations at Phase 3 compared to 8.6% of the total number of coded representations at Phase 1). Further, at Phase 3 parenting program children's story stems were coded less frequently for unresolved parent vulnerability (9.6% of the total number of coded representations at Phase 3 compared to 24.1% of the total number of coded representations at Phase 1), and unresolved child vulnerability (9.6% of the total number of coded representations at Phase 3 compared to 12% of the total number of coded representations at Phase 1). The frequency with which parenting program children's stories were coded for distortions of narrative or odd, intrusive and frightening imagery increased slightly from Phase 1 (13.8% of the total number of coded presentations) to Phase 3 (15.4% of the total number of coded representations).

In relation to the supported playgroup children's story responses, at Phase 3 there was an increase in the frequency of codes for attachment behaviour (24% of the total number of coded representations at Phase 3 compared to 5.9% of the total number of coded

representations at Phase 1). In contrast, at Phase 3 the percentage of the total number of coded representations decreased for child autonomous behaviour (Phase 1: 11.7%; Phase 3: 4%), child-child empathy (Phase 1: 17.6%; Phase 3: 8%), and pleasant family interactions (Phase 1: 35.3%; Phase 3: 12%).

The frequency in application of the level I content codes between Phases 1 and 3 for preschool children's story responses remained fairly stable although there was slight decrease in the percentage of representations for parent-child nurture and caregiving (Phase 1: 24%; Phase 3: 20.5%) and child autonomous behaviour (Phase 1: 20%; Phase 3: 14.5%). At Phase 3 there was an increase in representations that were distorted, odd, or frightening in the preschool children's narratives (5.3% of the total number of coded representations at Phase 1 compared to 12% of the total number of coded representations at Phase 3).

**Avoidance and coherence.** At Phase 3 parenting program and supported playgroup children's story responses were coded less frequently for avoidance or dismissal of the story elements than they had been at Phase 1 (72% and 30% respectively compared with 80% and 60% respectively). The same code was applied to slightly more preschool children's story responses at Phase 3 when compared to Phase 1 (52.5% compared to 50% respectively). A smaller percentage of parenting program children's stories received a score of 1 for coherence (40% at Phase 3 compared to 72% at Phase 1). On the other hand, 20% of the supported playgroup children's and 20% of the preschool children's story stems received a score of 1 for coherence at Phase 3 (as opposed to 10% and 12.5% respectively at Phase 1) reflecting an increase in this score on this code. However, the majority of stories from supported playgroup and preschool children still received a score of 2 or 3 for coherence at Phase 3.

Table 7.4

*Most Frequently Applied ASCT Level I Content Codes by Program at Phase 3*

	Parenting Program		Supported Playgroup		Preschool	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Total number of coded representations	52		25		83	
Child autonomous behaviour	2	3.8	1	4.0	12	14.5
Unresolved child vulnerability	5	9.6	1	4.0	5	6.0
Child-child empathy/caregiving	4	7.7	2	8.0	3	3.6
Attachment behaviour	7	13.5	6	24.0	16	19.3
Parent-child nurture/caregiving/protection	9	17.3	6	24.0	17	20.5
Parent authoritative structure or discipline	3	5.8	1	4.0	3	3.6
Parent-child hostility/harsh discipline/aggression/abuse	1	1.9	2	8.0	-	-
Unresolved parent vulnerability	5	9.6	-	-	3	3.6
Pleasant family interaction/activity	2	3.8	3	12.0	7	8.4
Distortions of narrative/odd/intrusive/frightening imagery	8	15.4	2	8.0	10	12.0
Other	6	11.5	1	4.0	7	8.4

**Level II Process Scales**

Descriptive statistics for the ASCT level II process scales for each program at Phase 3 are presented in Table 7.5. Parenting program children's median scores across the three scales showed an increase from Phase 1 to Phase 3.

Table 7.5

*Descriptive Statistics for ASCT Level II Process Scales by Program at Phase 3*

	Parenting Program	Supported Playgroup	Preschool
N	5	2	8
Attachment			
<i>Mdn</i>	2.00	4.50	3.00
<i>M (SD)</i>	2.60 (1.52)	4.50 (2.12)	3.50 (1.41)
Caregiving			
<i>Mdn</i>	2.00	4.00	4.00
<i>M (SD)</i>	2.80 (1.10)	4.00 (1.41)	3.88 (1.46)
Exploration/Sociability			
<i>Mdn</i>	4.00	4.00	4.00
<i>M (SD)</i>	3.40 (1.82)	4.00 (0.00)	4.13 (0.84)

Results from a Kruskal-Wallis test found no significant difference between the three programs in median attachment scores,  $\chi^2(2) = 2.69, p = .292$ , median caregiving scores,  $\chi^2(2) = 2.34, p = .332$ , or median exploration/sociability scores,  $\chi^2(2) = 0.08, p = .884$ , at Phase 3. It appeared that the positive movement in parenting program children's ASCT level II process scale scores at Phase 3 brought them more in line with Phase 3 scores for the supported playgroup and preschool children.

### **Change in Attachment Story Completion Task Results during Program Participation**

To determine if there was any significant change (within groups) in the children's ASCT results from Phase 1 to Phase 3, a Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was performed. There was a trend only for a difference in parenting program children's median scores on the caregiving scale between Phases 1 and 3,  $z = -2.12, p = .063$ . While non-significant, the direction was towards parenting program children's caregiving scores being higher at Phase 3 than at Phase 1. No significant differences between Phases 1 and 3 for parenting program

children were found on the attachment scale score,  $z = -1.63$ ,  $p = .250$ , or the exploration/sociability scale score,  $z = -1.89$ ,  $p = .125$ .

Results showed no significant difference between Phases 1 and 3 for supported playgroup children's scores on the attachment scale,  $z = -1.34$ ,  $p = .500$ , caregiving scale,  $z = -1.00$ ,  $p = 1.000$ , or exploration/sociability scale,  $z = -1.00$ ,  $p = 1.000$ . Similarly, no significant difference was found on any scale from Phase 1 to Phase 3 for preschool children: attachment scale,  $z = -0.43$ ,  $p = .813$ ; caregiving scale,  $z = -1.41$ ,  $p = .312$ ; exploration/sociability scale,  $z = -0.26$ ,  $p = .984$ . This suggests that supported playgroup and preschool children's narrative attachment representations remained relatively stable over the research period.

### **Qualitative Data**

Claire's narrative responses to the Hurt Knee story are presented as an example of the trend towards change in parenting program children's scores on the caregiving scale between Phases 1 and 3. The Hurt Knee story was selected as it often elicits children's representations of parent nurture which is one of the level I content codes that constitutes the larger construct of the caregiving system. In this story, the family (mother, father and two siblings) visit a park where there is a high rock. One of the children tells the parents they are going to climb the high rock and the mother says, "Be careful." The child falls off the rock and cries, "I've hurt my knee." The expected resolution to this story involves the child's injury being acknowledged by a parent. In addition, parents may attend to the child's injury and then assist or encourage the child to successfully climb the rock. The first narrative presented is Claire's response at Phase 1, followed by her response at Phase 3.

**Claire's response to the Hurt Knee story: Phase 1.**

R: [Presents story stem]. *Show me and tell me what happens now.*

Claire: *Um ...* [Looks at R and shrugs her shoulders].

R: [Prompts]. *What happens with her hurt knee?* [Points to girl].

Claire: [Pauses. Looks between the girl and the other family members].

R: [Prompts again]. *Does something happen with her knee?*

Claire: *No.* [Shakes head].

R: [Prompts]. *Does anything else happen?*

Claire: [Looks down and plays with fingers].

R: *Would you like to look at the next story?*

Claire: [Nods head].

**Claire's response to the Hurt Knee story: Phase 3.**

R: [Presents story stem]. *Show me and tell me what happens now.*

Claire: *And daddy came.* [Moves the father over to the girl]. *And she got up.* [Puts the girl on her feet near the father]. *And she can't even walk.* [Moves the father and girl back over to the mother and boy].

R: *Did you say she can't even walk?*

Claire: *And she had to sit down on the ground.* [Sits the girl down beside the father and boy].

R: *Does anything else happen with the hurt knee?*

Claire: [Shrugs her shoulders].

R: *Okay. Are you ready for the next story?*

Claire: [Nods head].

At Phase 1, Claire was unable to provide any response to this story and seemed unsure of the behaviour that would be expected in this situation. There was no demonstration of parental nurture or caregiving, and the hurt knee was not acknowledged or addressed by any family member. In contrast, at Phase 3 a caregiving response was enacted with the father approaching the girl (acknowledgment of the injury) and bringing her back to the family though the parents provided no further care or assistance. While the optimal resolution was not presented at Phase 3 (such as the parent tending to the injury and then helping the child climb the rock), there was no avoidance of the story elements, the story presented was positive and logical (though short), and Claire actively engaged in the story-telling process.

### **Chapter Summary**

At Phase 1 parenting program children's story stem completions reflected unresolved parent and child vulnerability, odd or frightening imagery and avoidance of the story elements. In contrast, supported playgroup and preschool children's story responses were characterised by more positive themes (such as parent-child nurture, pleasant family interactions, and attachment behaviour) though avoidance of story elements was also present for some children. A significant difference was found at Phase 1 between the parenting program and preschool children's ratings on the attachment and caregiving level II process scales.



At Phase 3, level I content codes were applied more frequently for attachment behaviour and parent-child nurture, and less frequently for parent and child unresolved vulnerability in parenting program children's narrative responses than at Phase 1. More attachment behaviour was evident in the supported playgroup children's stories over time while preschool children's story responses remained fairly stable. The presence of more positive story content themes in parenting program children's responses and the relative stability over time in preschool and supported playgroup children's narrative responses also resulted in no significant differences being found between the three programs on the level II process scale scores at Phase 3.

A positive non-significant trend for higher caregiving scale scores at Phase 3 than at Phase 1 was found for parenting program children. This trend may indicate a potential outcome of program participation for parenting program children and their families. This is particularly important as a focus for the parenting program is on increasing parents' responsiveness and sensitivity in caregiving and nurturing of their children. There was no significant change for attachment scale scores or exploration/sociability scale scores for parenting program children from Phase 1 to Phase 3. No significant change over time was found for supported playgroup and preschool children's level II process scale scores.

In the current research, the Attachment Story Completion Task was one of several data collection activities used to elicit children's perspectives. With such young children involved in the research, a number of child-focused and age-appropriate research approaches and data collection activities were used to engage children in the research process, and provide opportunities for children to share their experiences in many different ways. The following chapter presents the researcher's reflections on children's engagement with the research process.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

Doing research with young children is as complex, rewarding, and messy as living and working with them (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 13).

Researcher reflections on the research process are presented in this chapter. Unlike other chapters in this thesis, this chapter is written in the first person. As Jasper (2003) wrote, “The purpose of reflective writing is personal ... It is clearly nonsense to try to write reflectively in the third person, or take yourself out of the account” (p. 150). The essence of this chapter is my own personal reflections on the children’s engagement with the research process. In doing so, I must also reflect on my own multiple and changing roles as the researcher and acknowledge the impact I had on the research process. Further, ‘voicing’ my observations and reflections on the research process is needed before considering the research findings in a meaningful way.

In the current research, a range of available data collection methods was drawn on to address the research questions. These methods were designed to include the voices of young children in research, and were chosen on the basis of the literature to be accessible and appropriate for young children, particularly those who were hard-to-reach or disadvantaged. These activities included two methods adapted from the Mosaic approach (child-led photography and a program participation interview), an ecocultural child interview (everyday home and family life), and the Attachment Story Completion Task (child-completed projective attachment-based measure).

The opening quote of the chapter captures neatly my experiences of data collection in the current project. Even though the data collection methods were selected (and sometimes adapted) following the pilot study, I still faced challenges in engaging children in the research

process during the main study. During data collection, I continuously and critically reflected on the methods, asking myself whether children's authentic experiences were being captured and how I could adapt the methods to better suit particular groups of children. Even so, some methods were more successful than others at eliciting children's perspectives, and children from the three groups engaged quite differently in the research process.

This chapter begins with reflections on the multiple and changing roles of the researcher at the three programs. I then provide a critical reflection on the usefulness of the data collection methods in eliciting young children's perspectives first on their experiences of program participation and second on their everyday home and family life. By doing so, I can document my learning from these experiences, provide a context for interpretation of findings, and contribute to the literature on ways of including children's voices in research.

### **Multiple Roles of the Researcher**

Research with young children should be participatory, particularly when we acknowledge children as experts in their own lives, are genuinely interested in understanding their experiences, and want to establish honest, reciprocal relationships with the children we work alongside. By acknowledging this as an underlying principle of my thesis project, I shifted my focus from 'expert' to 'authentic novice', a term used in the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2005, p. 97). While this was how I saw myself as a researcher, throughout the research period, it was clear that I had multiple and changing roles and that I was viewed quite differently by child participants, their parents, and program staff depending on the program context.

### **Relationships with Children**

Establishing rapport and trust is essential to the successful inclusion of children in research. This was an important initial stage of the research process for all programs and it

provided opportunities for the children and me to become familiar and comfortable with each other. At these early stages of Phase 1, I spent considerable time playing with the children, talking with them, and generally becoming a familiar face at the programs. Some children from each of the programs viewed me as someone to play with or an adult who helped them at the program. This was an interesting and unexpected theme that emerged from the children's program participation interviews. For example, at Phase 1 while reviewing the photographs he took, Michael from the parenting program said, "*We just play with play dough*" after seeing a photograph of me. Another parenting program child, Lucas, spoke about playing with me as one of his favourite things about attending the program when he said, "*I like to play with you.*" Similarly, Gemma from the supported playgroup perceived being able to visit me as a reason why children "*love[d] playgroup*" and Sarah and Noah from the preschool identified me as an adult who helped them at the program. From these children's accounts, it appeared they viewed being involved in the research, my presence at the programs, and their relationship with me as positive experiences.

Further, as an adult researcher interested in these children's lived experiences, play was a way for me to establish rapport with the children, support opportunities for regular and warm interactions, and facilitate conversations (interviews) and data collection. Throughout the research period, I was often asked by parenting program children (and at times supported playgroup and preschool children) to "*play with me*" and these requests were always fulfilled. Similar to Stephenson's (2009) experiences of early childhood research, I felt it offered the children the "most authentic act of reciprocity" (p. 137).

On reflection, the way children perceived my role may have skewed their experiences of program participation during the time I was with them, particularly for the parenting program children. At times it was difficult to engage the parenting program children in the data collection activities and compared to the other groups, particularly the preschool

children, they tended to spend more time simply playing with me. This may have been a reflection of a lack of playful adult interactions that occurred in their everyday lives (this assumption can be supported by the everyday home and family life interviews, though some parenting program children described more parent-child play at home in the later research phases). I also observed very little parent-child play at the parenting program (and at the supported playgroup) and perhaps these children saw me as an adult play partner (as well as a researcher) because I was willing and available to engage with them in their play experiences.

Even so, if I had not spend time playing and interacting with the children they may have mentioned more often their parents, program staff or other children as play partners within the program context. If I had not helped them with their art and craft activities or to resolve disputes, they may have identified their parents or program staff more often as adults who helped them. These possible impacts of my involvement need to be considered, particularly in relation to the influence of the chosen methodology on children's experiences.

### **Relationships with Parents**

I also realised the importance of establishing rapport and developing relationships with the mothers of the children, particularly at the parenting program. During initial recruitment conversations with mothers at one of the parenting program centres, I was aware of an invisible barrier between myself and the mothers. In this particular centre, I might have been viewed as an 'outsider', another 'academic' come to do research on their children, as well as a potential mandatory reporter to child protection services. I could not say I was accepted straightaway at the other parenting program centre involved in the study, but the mothers there were more welcoming and more interested in the research. Building rapport and trust with mothers who attended the parenting program was a critical first step in the research process, and its importance should not be underestimated.

In contrast, my experience with mothers from the supported playgroup was quite different. While I had positioned myself as a researcher at the program, I felt I was viewed by mothers as a mix of ‘expert’ on parenting and child issues, and ‘mother’ with stories to share about my own two young children. This blended view of my role also meant that my presence at the supported playgroup became normal and accepted quite quickly. Mothers would often ask after my children, share their concerns about their own children with me, and ask me for advice. To me, this also seemed congruent with how supported playgroup parents interacted with the Play Facilitator.

I had very little contact with mothers from the preschool (compared to mothers at the parenting program and supported playgroup). This was due to several factors including the recruitment strategy as I did not directly approach preschool parents as I did with the other two groups during recruitment. Unlike at the parenting program and supported playgroup, parents did not remain at the preschool and as I often arrived at the preschool after the morning drop-off period the preschool parents and I did not often meet.

### **Relationships with Staff**

While the program staff understood my presence at the programs and my role as a researcher, at times during data collection the boundary between researcher and ‘extra adult’ became less defined. Several factors contributed to this, some of which related to the program context, others to the research design and methodology (e.g., deliberate shift from observer to participant observer during the early phases of the data collection). In relation to program staff I felt my role as a researcher remained fairly clear-cut at the preschool and supported playgroup even when I actively participated in these programs.

On the other hand, at the parenting program, mothers and program staff were viewed equally and all members were expected to contribute and participate when possible in the

‘daily life’ of the program. In this context my perceived role became more fluid. At times I was viewed by program staff (and mothers) as an ‘extra pair of hands’ and on occasion it was necessary for me to offer support (e.g., during crises). However, I was also included in the daily routines of the program (e.g., I was sung to by the members and invited to select a ‘feelings’ bear during the morning Hello Song). I recognise the potential influence this may have had on the children’s experiences of me at the parenting program. Yet, how my role was perceived by program staff also meant that I became an accepted ‘part of the family’ and this was essential to forming trusting relationships with the children and their parents within this context.

In summary, the multiple roles I played at the programs were central to the successful inclusion of children in the research. My research was not conducted in a laboratory but in real-life settings in which I spent considerable time, participated actively, and built relationships with the children, their mothers and the staff. To remain detached and uninvolved would also potentially influence children’s experiences of the program, and may have limited their interactions with me, and my ability to share their reports sensitively and respectfully.

### **Reflections on the Mosaic Approach**

In the current research, the Mosaic approach was used to gather data on children’s experiences of program participation. Several data collection methods were adapted from the Mosaic approach: child-led photography and child interviews. In child-led photography each child was given a digital camera and invited to photograph what was important to them or what they wanted to show other children about the program they attended. I provided an initial demonstration on how to use the digital camera. Following this, all children who chose to take photographs were able to use the camera easily and required very little assistance. Each child reviewed and talked about their photographs with me on two separate occasions.

In the first, an initial review occurred using the digital camera's in-built screen. The photographs were reviewed a second time after they were uploaded onto a laptop computer and discussed again.

The child interview was semi-structured and focused on key themes in relation to program participation (e.g., favourite and least favourite activities, the role of adults at the program, and what sorts of things children did at the program). Children were offered the choice of individual or small group interviews. Most children chose to complete this interview individually though some preschool children chose to complete this activity in the company of another child. Interviews often occurred while children were playing or 'on the move'.

It was anticipated that children from all three groups (parenting program, supported playgroup, and preschool) would engage readily with the research process through the use of participatory, adaptable, and age-appropriate activities such as those used in the Mosaic approach. However this was not always the case. Aspects of the Mosaic approach were not as successful with some groups of children (particularly the parenting program children) as for others. My reflections on children's engagement with the activities adapted from the Mosaic approach are presented below for each program.

## **Parenting Program**

**Child-led photography.** During recruitment, several parenting program mothers mentioned how much their children enjoyed taking photographs using their mothers' smart phones. This was promising in relation to children's engagement with this particular activity. However, across the three research phases only three of the five parenting program children chose to take photographs after being offered the digital camera. These children did not take photographs at every phase. Michael was the only child to take photographs at more than one phase of the research (at Phases 1 and 2). On numerous occasions, I invited the other children



to take photographs but the children declined each time. The number of photographs taken by the children who did participate in this activity ranged from three (Michael at Phase 2) to 143 (Alfie at Phase 3). These children's photographs were mostly of toys and play equipment with some photographs of me and program staff. While children took photographs of indoor and outdoor places, the majority of photographs were taken outside. There were only seven photographs of other children at the parenting program.

As parenting program children did not appear keen on taking their own photographs, I took photographs of activities (including toys, play equipment, and craft activities), places (indoor and outdoor), and the participant children playing at the program. I then reviewed and talked about these photographs with the children. This was not an ideal situation as the children had not chosen what to photograph. Even though I attempted to photograph what I felt were the places and activities children spent most of their time at the program, this was based on my own perceptions and was not from the child's perspective.

The photographs (my own and the children's) were useful as discussion prompts particularly as some parenting program children did not engage readily in the program participation interview. Occasionally children provided one-word answers (e.g., simply named the toy, place or person in the photograph). At other times more detail was given. Perspectives on program participation were expressed that may not have been expressed otherwise. For example, Lucas only mentioned the absence of the blue barrel in the outdoor play area at the parenting program, and Claire only spoke about liking the teddy bears at the parenting program because they reminded her of her own teddy bear after seeing my photographs of these objects. While not ideal, I felt my adaptation to the planned method was worthwhile as it elicited responses from the children that may have otherwise been left unheard.

**Child interview.** Parenting program children were the least likely to engage in the program participation interview. While they showed some interest in looking at and talking about the photographs, this interest did not transfer to the more traditional interview context in which visual aids/prompts were not used. I was particularly mindful to conduct these interviews where the children were playing or spent time at the program and the interviews always occurred while the child and I were playing together. This had been found to be an effective interview strategy during the pilot study.

Of the parenting program children, Claire appeared the most interested in talking with me about her time in the program. This was the case with Claire across the three phases of research. Other children (Michael and Lucas) would often answer only the first one or two questions (mostly with one-word responses) before asking me if we could just play instead of talk. Parenting program children were also more likely than children in other groups to not want to talk or answer any questions, or to respond with ‘I don’t know’. While having me as a play partner at the parenting program may have impacted to some extent on children’s willingness to engage in the research activities (they may have seen play as the more interesting activity), the open-ended question design and the types of questions asked may also have caused some problems. For these children, a more direct, explicit question may have elicited a more ready response. For example, instead of asking ‘Who are the adults who help you while you’re at the parenting program?’ it may have helped to rephrase this question to ask about each adult one at a time: ‘How does your mother (or staff person’s name) help you when you are at the parenting program? What does your mother (or staff person’s name) do for you when you are at the parenting program?’ Although prolonged engagement with the parenting program children meant there were multiple opportunities for asking the interview questions, the program participation interview data I gathered from them was limited compared with the data from children in other programs.

## **Supported Playgroup**

**Child-led photography.** Similar to parents at the parenting program, supported playgroup parents mentioned to me that their children enjoyed taking photographs at home using the family's digital camera or a parent's smart phone. Children from the supported playgroup took photographs enthusiastically at each research phase. Following my initial demonstration, participant children showed each other how to use the digital camera and also asked adults or other children to take photographs of them. While the children (particularly Gemma) really enjoyed this activity, the possibility of taking photographs tended to influence their engagement with other data collection activities. For this reason, there were times when I chose not bring the digital cameras to the program.

The number of photographs taken by supported playgroup children ranged from 20 to 94. Many of the photographs were of adults (parents, program staff, and me), other children, toys, and different spaces (e.g., home corner or the art and craft area). The photographs mostly mirrored children's responses during the program participation interview in terms of their likes, dislikes and favourite places at the supported playgroup.

As with the parenting program children, the supported playgroup children's photographs were useful as discussion prompts particularly during the initial review of the photographs on the camera's built-in screen. During the second review children were happy to look through their photographs again, but were less likely to offer any detail about the photographs. The photo discussions did challenge my own assumptions (and observations I had made previously) of why the children photographed particular things around the supported playgroup, and further demonstrated the need for children to share their own perspectives on environments in which they participate. For example, at Phase 1 Rosie took a photograph of the fireplace in the building where the supported playgroup was held (see Figure 8.1). Also in the photograph was the CD player (children's music was played quietly

as background music throughout the supported playgroup session). As Rosie had chosen not to photograph the drums as they were “*really loud*” and she did not like them, I thought the fireplace photograph may have captured her enjoyment of the quiet background music. However, during our discussion of this photograph Rosie surprised me when she said, “*It’s like Christmas and Santa coming down the chimney.*”



*Figure 8.1.* Rosie’s photograph of the fireplace at the supported playgroup.

**Child interview.** Similar to parenting program children, supported playgroup children participated individually in the program interview. Interviews occurred while the children and I played together or completed an art and craft activity. Unlike parenting program children, the two supported playgroup children completed their interviews at each phase of the research. Both Gemma and Catherine were capable of sharing their own unique experiences

of program participation although Gemma's responses tended to be more descriptive and detailed. This may have been related to age as Gemma was almost one year older than Catherine. At times Catherine would let me know she did not want to continue with the interview by saying, "*Let's play now.*"

## **Preschool**

**Child-led photography.** Child-led photography was a preferred data collection activity for the preschool children with most children participating in this activity at each research phase. The number of photographs taken by the children ranged from four to 141. Most of the photographs were of other children, toys, activities, and play equipment from around the preschool. Children often photographed outdoor play spaces initially before moving indoors to complete their photograph session. Staff members (and I) were in some of the children's photographs, though not to the same extent as we were for the supported playgroup children's photographs.

Similar to supported playgroup children, preschool children would often ask me, a staff member or another child to take a photograph of them. However, preschool children were different in that they also requested that photographs be taken of them with their friends. This wish to be photographed with their friends reflected their responses to the program participation interview in which they named friends and playing with friends as aspects of preschool they liked the most.

As with the other two groups, preschool children enjoyed the immediacy of seeing their photographs on the built-in camera screen. The screen enabled me to talk with each child about their photographs as they were taken. However, unlike the parenting program and supported playgroup children, preschool children were more engaged in the second review of their photographs on the laptop computer. While most of what was discussed during this

review was similar to their previous discussions, most preschool children gave more than one-word answers in describing the photographs (in contrast to parenting program and supported playgroup children). Within the preschool setting, the review of photographs also appeared to be a collective and collaborative activity. Other children (both participant and non-participant) were drawn to this activity, sharing their own thoughts on the photographs or joining in the other children's discussions.<sup>17</sup> As with parenting program and supported playgroup children, preschool children delighted in seeing photographs of themselves. However, preschool children were the only ones who called other children over to see themselves in the photographs.

**Child interview.** Preschool children participated readily in this interview over the three phases of research. Unlike the other two groups, some children chose to participate in this interview with another child, rather than on their own. This usually occurred with the two pairs of best friends who were involved in the study. In this context small group interviews were useful as the children tended to add their own thoughts to each other's or discuss their experiences or views amongst themselves. However, at times this also meant that these interviews dissolved into 'child chatter' and joking. For example, at Phase 3 Noah and Caleb chose to participate together in the interview. When asked why they thought they came to preschool, Noah said, "*Because my dad does big farts.*" There was a very clear change in the tone of the interview following this comment as Caleb talked about "*farting in people's faces*" as the thing he liked most about preschool. When Noah and Caleb completed their interviews individually during Phases 1 and 2, these types of response were not present. On reflection, 'joking' responses may have been related to the timing of data collection. Phase 3 (mid-November to mid-December) occurred during the preschool's 'winding down' period

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<sup>17</sup> Only data related to participant children was used in the analysis.

before Christmas. At this time, the preschool children were generally less settled and more excitable.

### **Comparison between Programs in Children's Engagement with the Mosaic Approach**

Clear differences existed between parenting program, supported playgroup, and preschool children in their engagement with the data collection methods adapted from the Mosaic approach. First, parenting program children were less keen to take their own photographs while children from the other two groups took photographs enthusiastically at every phase of the research. Second, the content of the photographs was different between the three groups of children. However, children's photographs mostly reflected their responses to the program participation interview. Third, of the three groups of children, preschool children included friends more often when taking and reviewing photographs. For preschool children, these activities appeared to be an opportunity for social interaction as much as part of the research process. The importance of peers to preschool children's experiences of program participation was further reflected in the way they engaged with their friends when completing the data collection activities. Fourth, photographs as discussion prompts proved to be a particularly effective method for eliciting the views of children who were less talkative during the program participation interview (e.g., parenting program children and some supported playgroup children). This demonstrated the importance of providing multiple ways for children to share their perspectives.

### **Reflections on the Ecocultural Child Interview**

The aim of the ecocultural child interview was to understand how children perceived their everyday home and family life through exploring their family's daily routines. In an ecocultural child interview children are asked concrete and specific questions about what happens at home, who is involved, and what sorts of words are used during different activity settings (routines) that make up their day. It was thought that this style of interview would be

useful in capturing children's experiences of everyday home life and any perceived changes that might have occurred during program participation.

While there was an interview schedule developed for the current research, I pursued any issues raised by children that went beyond the schedule of questions. Sometimes this would mean children did not talk about their day sequentially (though this was never a requirement or intention of this interview) or only talked about one aspect that was particularly meaningful to them. Initially I worried that this might limit or prevent the emergence of a complete picture of children's experiences of home life as for some children only part of their home life was being discussed. However, as an early childhood researcher I adhered to the tenet of reflexivity and continuous critical questioning of whether I was supporting (or hindering) children to share their unique experiences of their own lives. While I had a research agenda, I acknowledged and accepted that this would not always match with the children's agendas. By following the child's lead in the interviews, interesting (and sometimes divergent or unexpected) stories emerged which may have been neglected or silenced otherwise. Even so, as with the other data collection activities, the ecocultural child interview worked better for preschool and some supported playgroup children than for parenting program children.

### **Parenting Program**

I found the ecocultural child interview difficult to complete with parenting program children, particularly with the younger children. As with the program participation interview, this interview was conducted on a one-to-one basis and occurred while the child and I were playing together. For parenting program children this interview was not completed in one session as it was for the supported playgroup and preschool children. I asked questions over several hours and over several visits to the program. While I felt the children and I had developed rapport and trust in our relationship, this may not have been the case. Some



children did not want to answer any questions about their home or family life, and this may have reflected children's feelings of trust, their level of comfort in sharing stories about their lives with me or loyalty to their families. Other children gave one-word answers although this changed over the research period with some children (generally the older ones) giving more detail as the research progressed. This may have been due to factors related to child development (increased language ability, better understanding and awareness of their daily routines as well as their 'scripts' about their home environment).

I found play as a 'conversation starter' was quite effective for leading into the ecocultural interview with parenting program children. For example, I often played with the doll house with the participating children. During these times, I would ask questions about their home life as the children enacted scenes of home life with the dolls (e.g., putting the dolls to bed). At times this was successful in that children sometimes gave a response when previously they had simply said, "I don't know."

As with all the data collection activities, the ecocultural interview was completed with the child at the program. However, greater insight into parenting program children's everyday home and family life may have been elicited if the ecocultural interviews had taken place in their homes. Being in the home environment may have helped children reflect on and describe their experiences of home life more easily. Yet shifting the location of the interview may have only helped to some degree as during my time at the parenting program, general conversations I had with the children were limited and often one-sided. This in itself may not seem unusual as adults tend to initiate and sustain conversations with young children. However, when compared to most supported playgroup and preschool children, parenting program children appeared to have had less experience in verbal social interactions with adults. This perception was supported by my observations of children's interactions with mothers and program staff at the parenting program.

In the program context, children's interactions with their mothers were often limited. I did not observe many mother-child conversations beyond mothers requesting children to come to lunch or enquiring if they needed to use the bathroom. Mothers tended to talk more often with other mothers even during times designed to facilitate parent-child interactions (e.g., lunch time and afternoon play sessions). Children's perspectives also suggested opportunities were not always available at home to practice adult-child conversations or to reflect on and talk about the day's activities or events (e.g., talking was not encouraged at dinner time).

Children's interactions with program staff were sometimes not much better although this was more dependent on the parenting program centre children attended. Program staff at one centre were more proactive at engaging children in conversation (e.g., staff would talk with children when they played together, asked children to explain their artwork, and included children in conversations at lunch time). This contrasted with children's interactions with program staff at the other centre. At this centre, program staff more often spoke with children in reaction to events (e.g., following conflict between children) although staff did ask children to explain why they chose particular 'feelings' bears during the morning greeting activity. Further, children were more often 'left to their own devices' during the morning play session with little play interaction between program staff and children. Engagement in the ecocultural interview was probably influenced by parenting program children's previous experiences of adult-child conversations and interactions.

### **Supported Playgroup**

Supported playgroup children participated in the ecocultural interview at all research phases and were capable of describing their everyday home life. Gemma's interviews were lengthier and more detailed than Catherine's (as for the program interview). However across the research period, Catherine engaged more easily with the ecocultural interview and her

responses became more descriptive. Some of this could be accounted for by differences in age from Phase 1 to Phase 3. It could also be due to my prolonged and continual engagement with her at the supported playgroup, and her becoming more comfortable with me and more familiar with the data collection activities (including the ecocultural interview). In addition, towards the end of the research period, Catherine was less likely to stay close by her mother (and vice versa) and explored more freely the different areas of the supported playgroup. This may have impacted on her engagement with the interview as previously her mother would sometimes answer for her, or ‘fill in the blanks’ when Catherine did not respond. During Phases 2 and 3, Catherine’s mother did not stay nearby to Catherine thus she and I spoke more often without her mother’s immediate presence.

Interviews with Gemma tended to stray from the main focus of the question more often than with Catherine. I did not view this negatively as in these moments, Gemma told stories that were meaningful to her experiences of everyday home life, stories that she wanted to share with me. For example, after telling me her father created stories just for her, she delighted in sharing with me one of these ‘fairy tales’.

## **Preschool**

Preschool children engaged readily with the ecocultural interview. While all preschool children were able to describe their everyday home and family life, older children tended to give more detail or speak about aspects of home life that were beyond the scope of the interview schedule. Unlike parenting program children, being a conversation partner for an adult appeared to be a familiar and comfortable situation for most preschool children. This was apparent not only within the interview context but in any conversation I had with the preschool children during the research period.

Some preschool children completed the ecocultural interview in pairs or invited their friends (non-participating children) to be with them during the interview. This caused similar issues to those discussed previously in this chapter (e.g., ‘child chatter’ and joking responses). The end-of-year timing of Phase 3 also seemed to impact on the children’s participation in the ecocultural interview. At Phase 3 it was more difficult to engage and maintain the focus of preschool children. This may have been reflected in themes relevant to preschool children’s descriptions of everyday home life as at Phase 3, some themes were not as prevalent as at other phases (e.g., growing independence). However at this time some parts of their everyday home life may simply have been more important for these children to share with me. For example, Noah talked about his father arriving in Australia as a refugee and as it was near Christmas, Theo and Sean explained in detail about their chocolate advent calendars.

### **Comparison between Programs of Children’s Engagement with the Ecocultural Child Interview**

The ecocultural interview offered a concrete approach to eliciting children’s descriptions of everyday home and family life during program participation. Of the three groups of children, it was less easy to engage parenting program children in this interview. This may have been associated with children’s previous experiences with adult-child conversations, particularly in relation to an adult asking open-ended questions that required reflective thinking or that elicited children’s opinions. The presence of parents (supported playgroup) and other children (preschool) may have also hindered some children’s participation in this interview.

### **Reflections on the Attachment Story Completion Task**

In the current research the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT) was used to examine children’s narrative representations of their attachment relationships during program participation. Of all the data collection activities, there was less variation by program in

children's engagement with the ASCT. For this reason, reflections will not be presented for each group separately. Instead, overall reflections of response to the ASCT are discussed.

Some children were unsure of how to complete the story stems even with prompts although at Phase 1 parenting program children were more likely to initially respond with "I don't know." Other children were easily distracted by the doll props and toy car used in the ASCT. This was common among the younger children across the three programs. However, in the current research, the main challenge in using the ASCT was in relation to the location of the activity. This was a common problem at each of the three programs. As data collection needed to be completed where program staff (and/or parents) were able to see the children and me (due to legal requirements), participant children were sometimes distracted by other children or by activities taking place at the same time. This also meant in most situations other children had free access to the space in which the ASCT was being conducted. The other children would want to play with the doll props, ask questions, or look at the video camera. Even though program staff tried to prevent this from occurring as much as possible, the administration of the ASCT was still sometimes disrupted.

While parenting program and supported playgroup children generally completed the ASCT individually (that is, not intentionally inviting other children to be with them), this was not always the case for preschool children. As with the other data collection activities, some preschool children wanted their friends with them while they completed the ASCT. This occurred mostly at Phase 3. For some preschool children, having friends present during the administration of the ASCT was not disruptive. On the other hand, other children seemed distracted by having their friends present, and sometimes caused them to respond in ways that attracted or engaged their peers (e.g., responses that were more joke-like or playful) when telling their stories. In addition, one girl told similar stories to those told by her friend, although this occurred for only some of the story stems.

## **Further Reflections**

In this section I present some of my other ‘experiences’ and reflections on conducting the current study.

### **Hidden Expectations**

My observations about children’s engagement with the research methods highlighted the inappropriateness of assuming that any one methodological approach or data collection method would suit all. Many of the research methods used in the current study have been considered ‘child-friendly’, appropriate, and effective in eliciting children’s experiences in early childhood research (see Baird, 2013; Clark & Moss, 2009; Clark & Statham, 2005; Greenfield, 2011; Merewether & Fleet, 2014; Stephenson, 2009). The observed differences in children’s engagement in my research across the three programs indicated possible and hidden expectations of researchers that data collection tools will simply be flexible, able to engage all children in the research process, and elicit their responses by offering multiple ways for children to share their perspectives. My experiences in the current research, and the responsiveness and engagement of some children with the data collection methods (particularly parenting program children) suggest otherwise.

### **Adapting Data Collection Methods**

A pilot study was conducted to test the effectiveness of the selected data collection methods (as discussed in Chapter 4). Even so, an adaptive use of the data collection methods (e.g., child-led photography) was required for some children, particularly in the parenting program. I was aware that this might compromise examination of the findings in an equitable and accurate way. However, I considered these adaptations necessary to remain true to the primary goals of the research.

### **‘Critical Friends’**

In some ways, the current study went into methodologically ‘unchartered territory’ due to some of the data collection methods chosen to explore disadvantaged young children’s experiences of a parenting program. Because of this, I found it essential to seek and reach out to ‘critical friends’ to provide guidance in considering children’s responsiveness to some of the methods. These ‘critical friends’ included my doctoral supervisors, other academics, and fellow doctoral candidates researching with young children.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I have presented my reflections on the research process. Doing research with vulnerable young children is challenging. However, by developing trusting and reciprocal relationships with children and their parents, prolonged engagement, and the use of multiple methods, some of these challenges could be overcome. Further, different and additional methods are likely to be needed for eliciting the experiences of children with more limited language and social skills, such as the parenting program children in the current study. Visual aids (e.g., photographs) and methods in which non-verbal responses are also considered (such as in the ASCT) could facilitate better the inclusion of vulnerable children in the research process.

A discussion of the key research findings and implications of the current study for further research and for practice are presented in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 9

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study was designed to capture vulnerable young children's experiences of an attachment-based parenting program and to understand how these children perceived or described changes in their family during program participation. The inclusion of a supported playgroup and a preschool in the study provided opportunities to compare the experiences of the parenting program children to children who participate in other early childhood interventions. The research was a longitudinal study with three time points and it used a mixed method approach with a range of child-appropriate, participatory, and qualitative data gathering methods as well as quantitative standardised measures. The project has provided a comprehensive account of children's experiences of participation and everyday home and family life during involvement in a parenting program.

This chapter discusses the key findings for children in the parenting program in relation to the research questions and existing literature. Implications for policy and practice in relation to parenting programs as well as implications for research with young children are discussed. Further directions for research and limitations of the study are also considered.

#### Overview of Findings

This thesis addressed two key research questions with a focus on children's perspectives. First, *How do young children experience and describe program participation, and does this change over time?* Two additional questions about children's program participation were included within this key question. The first: *Is there a difference between the three programs in the quality of children's peer interactions, and does the quality of peer interactions change over time during program participation?* The second: *How do mothers perceive their children's program participation, and does this change over time?* By drawing



on multiple and different perspectives (child and mother), a better understanding of children's experiences of program participation was achieved.

The second key research question was: *How do young children perceive everyday home and family life as well as any changes that may occur in their families during program participation?* Children's narrative representations of their attachment relationships and caregiving environments, and any changes to these during involvement in the parenting program were also considered within this question.

### **Summary of Findings: Research Question 1**

The findings revealed that children's descriptions of participation in the parenting program were fairly consistent across the research period. Although play remained an important feature of participation for these children, no significant improvement in the quality of their peer interactions was found during program participation. This finding was reinforced by the relative absence of themes in the children's interviews that related to friendship networks, social interactions and relationships (e.g., friendships or playing with friends). In contrast, play experiences and social interactions for their children were perceived as benefits of the parenting program by mothers across the research period.

### **Summary of Findings: Research Question 2**

From the children's accounts, home and family life for parenting program children appeared to be quite different from that reported by the comparison groups. In contrast to supported playgroup and preschool children, parenting program children's responses contained no mention of love and affection as expressions of connectedness in the parent-child dyad, no reports of shared meal times as opportunities to reconnect as a family or talk about the day's events, and no reference to learning activities (e.g., book reading) at home. However, over time there was a positive shift in perceptions of some aspects of home life for

two parenting program children. First, change was found in one child's experiences of increased parent-child play. This indicated a possible change in the parent-child relationship and improvement in the connectedness of this particular parent-child dyad. Second, change was also found in two children's experiences of having friends home to play. This suggests potential improvements to social support networks for families during program involvement. There was also a trend towards positive change in narrative representations of caregiving within attachment relationships for parenting program children. Further, mothers' lives appeared to become more stable and less chaotic during program involvement (based on a reduced number of major life events experienced by mothers during the research period compared to the previous 12 months). Lastly, improvements in the home environment in resources and activities associated with child growth and development were found for some of the parenting program families.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This section examines the key findings in more depth taking into consideration existing literature. First, findings related to program participation, play experiences and social interactions and relationships, will be discussed. This will be followed by findings related to the parent-child relationship, including parent-child play, connectedness, and children's attachment representations.

#### **Play Experiences**

Providing play experiences for children was an integral part of the parenting program. Within the therapeutic and intervention context of the program, play experiences were viewed as opportunities for program staff to engage children, model appropriate social skills for parents, and encourage and support positive parent-child, staff-child, and child-child relationships (Mondy & Mondy, 2008a). From the children's perspective, play was a fundamental and important aspect of their experiences of program participation that they

reported consistently across the research period. This finding supports previous research. For example, in Mondy and Mondy's (2008c) study of young children's experiences of attending the same parenting program, children identified play as an aspect they liked most about the program.

While the program contexts were quite distinct, this did not seem to make any difference to children's experiences of play at the programs. In this regard, children's experiences of the parenting program were not remarkably different from those of the other early childhood settings involved in the research. Parenting program children's perspectives on the centrality of play in the current study paralleled those found in other research involving children in early childhood services such as preschools, and child care centres (Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2007; Clark & Statham, 2005; Dahl & Aubrey, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2005b; Farrell et al., 2002a; Grace et al., 2011). Furthermore, the importance of play experiences for parenting program children (as well as supported playgroup and preschool children) reflects the notion of play as being the 'work' of children and the occupation of childhood (Wilkes, Cordier, Bundy, Docking, & Munro, 2011).

**Play preferences.** Parenting program children's play preferences were comparable to those of children from the other two programs, particularly to those of preschool children. Both parenting program children and preschool children showed a strong preference for outdoor play. This also supports previous early childhood research that has reported on children's particular enjoyment of outdoor play in early childhood settings (Dahl & Aubrey, 2005; Grace et al., 2011; Kragh-Muller & Isbell, 2011; Merewether & Fleet, 2014). In the current study, the preference for outdoor play by parenting program and preschool children may have reflected the similarity of the physical environment of these two settings, and the relationship and interactions between the child and the resources available in the immediate environment to support their outdoor play experiences (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006;

Kernan, 2007). In addition, the structure of the programs and the availability of adults to supervise indoor/outdoor play may have influenced children's experiences of this aspect of program participation.

Further, the play materials available at the parenting program supported opportunities for children to engage in multiple forms of play, including pretend or dramatic play (e.g., pretend grocery store, home corner, and dress-up costumes) and manipulative or constructive play (e.g., puzzles, play dough, construction blocks and Lego). Other toys or play materials were also available such as toy animals and transport toys (e.g., cars and trains). These different play opportunities were available in all settings involved in the current study.

**The presence of violent themes during parenting program children's play.** The deliberate therapeutic play context provided in the parenting program may provide some explanation or at least an understanding in relation to the enactment of violent themes during children's pretend play. Violent themes present in the children's play were unique to the parenting program children. It has been suggested that children use pretend play to express and work through complex emotions, problems or anxieties (Fearn & Howard, 2012) and to release frustration and negative feelings (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2005). The parenting program play setting may have provided a safe context for these children to play out their concerns, and this may explain the prevalence of violent themes or violent and aggressive play, particularly with the toy animals and dolls (e.g., animals died violently or dolls hurt each other). Parenting program children were from more vulnerable homes than children from the other programs, and may have been (or still were) exposed to violence in their home environments. Thus, parenting program children may have had a greater need to express these feelings and anxieties through their play. Further, the parenting program children almost always engaged in solitary play when acting out violent themes with the toys. While there were other factors contributing to non-peer play, solitary play in this situation potentially had

a greater impact on reducing any stress or distress the children were feeling (see Barnett, 1984).

Play fighting and the use of symbolic weapons in play were observed in the preschool children (e.g., children being cut by a pretend light saber or being chased by a monster), and this play was clearly distinct from serious violence or aggression between peers or conflict over the play materials. In early childhood development research, this type of play has been found to be developmentally appropriate sociodramatic play typical of preschool-aged boys (Hart & Tannock, 2013; Jarvis, 2007; Logue & Harvey, 2009; Parsons & Howe, 2006). The play fighting observed with preschool children was different in this way from the violent themes enacted during play of parenting program children.

**Special or meaningful play objects.** Special or meaningful play objects or toys were also important to parenting program children's experiences of program participation. For some children these were different toys from those they had at home while for other children, special play objects provided a sense of congruence between the program setting and the home environment. Ensuring children felt safe and comfortable within this context was essential to the aims of the program, and the parenting program was intentionally designed to be a 'safe haven' for children and parents (Jenkins-Hanson, 2008). It can be argued then, that this connection or attachment to special toys within the program context was important for children's sense of ownership, belonging, and security within the parenting program. The perspectives of young children on the importance of special play objects or toys has also been reported in research on the experiences of other disadvantaged young children in early childhood services (Grace et al., 2011).

**Mothers' perceptions of play experiences for children.** In the current research, mothers' perceptions of play experiences at the programs mirrored those of their children

(regardless of program attended). That is, mothers also emphasised play as an aspect they liked about their children attending the programs. Jackson's (2009) research on supported playgroups in Australia found that play experiences provided in programs were highly valued and appreciated by parents. A similar finding was reported by mothers in Mondy and Mondy's (2008c) research on the parenting program that was the focus of the current research.

### **Social Interactions and Relationships**

The importance of effective social skills development and social development in early childhood on later life outcomes has been well documented (Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010; de Guzman, Wang, & Hill-Menson, 2007; Gormley, Phillips, Newmark, Welti, & Adelstein, 2011). Social skills are central in developing and maintaining relationships across the lifespan and effective social skills (often the basis of adaptive social competence) are associated with a child's school readiness, academic outcomes, and relative lack of behavioural difficulties (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). During early childhood, social skills begin to develop. They include turn-taking, cooperating, sharing, problem solving and conflict resolution, as well as friendship formation and effective peer interactions (Cooper, Paske, deHaan, & Zuzic, 2003). However, social skills development is more difficult for some children, and can cause problems for children in forming and interacting within peer relationships (Ladd et al., 2006).

In the current research, social skills and peer interactions were found to be significantly different between parenting program and preschool children. Over the course of the research, children in the parenting program maintained the lowest peer interaction scores of all three groups of observed children. This finding indicates that the social skills of parenting program children may have caused problems for them in forming and interacting within peer relationships while at the program (Ladd et al., 2006; McCabe & Altamura, 2011) and could potentially cause problems in developing and maintaining relationships across their

lifespan (Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010; Cooper et al., 2003; de Guzman et al., 2007; Gormley et al., 2011). In addition, parenting program children rarely spoke about playing with the other children at the program, did not identify having friends at the program (apart from Claire), and mostly engaged in solitary or parallel play.

Some of this may be explained by the age of the children as on average the parenting program children were younger than children in the other groups although the difference in children's ages between the three programs was not statistically significant. The youngest children from the supported playgroup and preschool groups also spoke about friends at the program or engaged in play experiences with the other children. Children initiated and sustained peer interactions and these interactions included play, cooperation, and reciprocity, all characteristic of peer relationships for this age group in early childhood (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). While children's social skills development and peer interactions within these early childhood contexts were not the sole focus of the current research, this finding does alert us to the significant difficulties in same-age social relationships and peer interactions for children who attended the parenting program.

**Factors potentially influencing children's social skills development.** Children's social skills development and their ability to interact with their peers and form friendships do not occur independently of their environments. Drawing on the bioecological model, a child's social development can be conceptualised as occurring through their interactions with the environments in which they participate, with their own individual characteristics also influencing these interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1995b; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Two interacting environments of influence (family/home context, and the early childhood intervention the child attended) were examined in the current study, and several factors stemming from interactions within these environments offer potential explanations of the poorer social skills of parenting program children. For example, preschool children often

spoke about recounting the day's events during family dinner times. These interactions may be seen as opportunities for children to practise conversational skills and turn-taking with parents and siblings as well as for parents to model social skills for their children (Fivush, Bohanke, Robertson, & Duke, 2004; Quick, Fiese, Anderson, Koester, & Marlin, 2011; Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). In contrast, parenting program children spoke about family dinner times as quiet times to eat when talking was not encouraged. Thus, opportunities to practise initiating and maintaining social interactions did not seem to be as present in the home lives of parenting program children. Other factors that influence social development (parent-child play, sibling play, parent-child attachment, and the influence of staff) are discussed below.

***Parent-child play.*** First, research has demonstrated the influence of the parent-child relationship on children's social skills development and peer relationships (Howes & Tonyan, 2003; Ladd et al., 2006). Parents as play partners provide opportunities to facilitate the development of social skills needed by their children for successful interactions with peers in a play context (Milteer, Ginsburg, & Mulligan, 2012). As parenting program children rarely spoke about their parents as play partners within either the program or home contexts, these 'learning' opportunities may not have been as present in these children's lives.

***Sibling play.*** Most parenting program children did talk about playing with their siblings at home. This suggests there were opportunities to practice appropriate social skills and interactions within a play context. Research evidence has found sibling relationships play an important role in children's social and emotional development and can impact on their ability to interact effectively with peers (Tsao & McCabe, 2010). Research also suggests that sibling relationships characterised mostly by warmth and engagement (rather than conflict) are better at promoting social skills development in children (Downey & Condrón, 2004; Harrist et al., 2014). In the context of the parenting program, staff could educate parents about the role sibling relationships (as well as the parent-child relationship) play in children's social



development and promote sibling interactions within the home environment that contribute to children developing effective social skills (White, Ensor, Marks, Jacobs, & Hughes, 2014). Further, to facilitate the learning of social skills, parents need to be instructed about providing appropriate intervention during negative sibling interactions such as teaching children alternative ways to resolve disputes (e.g., using words instead of hitting) (Downey & Condon, 2004). The current research did not explore sibling relationships in depth. However, further research that examines the influence of sibling relationships on peer relationships with a similar cohort of young children to those in the parenting program would be beneficial.

***Parent-child attachment relationship.*** Attachment theory suggests that a child's early attachment relationship with their primary caregiver is reflected in their subsequent interpersonal relationships and social interactions (Pallini et al., 2014; Schmidt, Demulder, & Denham, 2002). Children who have experienced reciprocity in their early attachment relationships as well as available, responsive, and sensitive caregiving are likely to expect these positive qualities in other social and emotional relationships, such as peer relationships (McCabe & Altamura, 2011; Sroufe et al., 1999). Compared to insecurely attached children, securely attached children are more likely to have confidence in exploring new environments and situations, such as peer relationships, and have the skills necessary to effectively initiate and interact with their peer social group (Seibert & Kerns, 2014; Sroufe, 2005). This central tenet of attachment theory has been the subject of extensive research (e.g., Bretherton et al., 2013; Page et al., 2011; Page & Bretherton, 2001; Schneider, Atkinson, & Tardiff, 2001; Seibert & Kerns, 2014; Sroufe, 2005; Verissimo, Santos, Fernandes, Shin, & Vaughn, 2014).

In the current research, the parenting program focused on supporting positive parent-child interactions with the aim of strengthening parent-child attachment relationships (Mondy & Mondy, 2008a). For some of the children who attended the parenting program, it was possible that they had not experienced many positive early attachment relationships as parents

were often referred (or self-referred) to the program because of difficulties in relationships with their children (Mondy & Mondy, 2008a). This would influence children's internal working models of subsequent relationships. Children's narrative representations in response to the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT) suggest the parent-child attachment relationship within parenting program families was potentially problematic. Parenting program children's limited social development and poor peer interactions may be a reflection of their attachment relationship with their parents (Bretherton et al., 2013; Pallini et al., 2014). That is, the parenting program children's early attachment relationships may have potentially influenced their expectations and confidence in subsequent peer relationships, limiting their ability to initiate, respond and interact effectively with peers (Verissimo et al., 2014).

Children who grow up in abusive, punitive or conflictual home environments are at greater risk of poor social development and are likely to have problems in friendship formation and peer interactions (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). Further, research has found maltreated children (compared to nonmaltreated children) have poorer skills in this area of social development (Darwish, Esquivel, Houtz, & Alfonso, 2001; Kim & Cicchetti, 2010; Landry & Swank, 2004; Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Frechette, 2014). While data on child maltreatment was not collected as part of this project, it can be assumed that some children who attended the parenting program had a history of maltreatment based on the program's aims and the target parent group. Thus, maltreatment may have impacted on the abilities of parenting program children to initiate and sustain social interactions with peers (Darwish et al., 2001). Children's feelings of trust of others and acceptance of intimacy in interpersonal relationships (e.g., friendships/peer relationships) (McCabe & Altamura, 2011) may take longer to overcome than the data collection period of the current study. However, inclusion of maltreatment history in the current research would have provided a better basis for this conclusion.

***Influence of staff.*** While the quality of the parent-child relationship can influence a child's peer relationships, so too can the early childhood setting in which they participate. Within these settings, staff guide children's behaviour and social interactions with their peers (Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2101; Howes et al., 2008). In the current research, this staff activity was clearly demonstrated in all of the programs. For example, the preschool children spoke specifically about the role of the staff as mediators of children's disputes. The parenting program staff also modelled appropriate social skills, social interactions, and positive peer play when working with the children. The researcher observed some qualitative changes in a few of the children's social interactions with their peers over the research period although these changes were not reflected in statistically significant change in the quantitative data. Even so, these small changes may have been an outcome of the role of staff in developing and supporting children's social skills and being responsive and sensitive in their interactions with (and between) children (Howes et al., 2008). With more time greater changes may have been evident.

**Contextual factors potentially influencing children's experiences of friends and peer interactions.** Children's discussion of friendships or playing with friends at the programs may be better understood in a contextual interpretation. Of particular interest are the affordances available in the program contexts for social development and peer interaction. From the children's reports, it was evident that friendship appeared to be available to children in all programs who were developmentally 'ready' for this experience. While all preschool children reported throughout the research period having and playing with friends at the program, discussions about friendships were limited in relation to the parenting program (and to some extent supported playgroup children).

Aspects of the preschool context, more so than the parenting program and supported playgroup, may have contributed to this finding. For example, the preschool was an early

childhood education and care (ECEC) program, operated under the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009). The EYLF sets out the principles, practices, and outcomes for ECEC programs working with children 0- to 5-years-old. Working within this framework, the preschool would need to implement opportunities to support and facilitate children's play and learning through appropriate environments as well as encourage relationships (Department of Education Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009). The next section will examine aspects of the programs' contexts (parents' presence at the programs, target age group of the programs, and the focus of the programs) as potential influencing factors in relation to children's friendship experiences.

***Parents' presence at the programs.*** The preschool was the only program in which parents did not remain on-site. Parents' presence at the parenting program and supported playgroup may have impacted on children's willingness or need to interact with peers. Preschool children spent the most time together without parents each day which may also account for their level of familiarity with each other and their more developed friendships and recognition of play partners within this context.

***Target age group of the programs.*** The target age group of the programs may have impacted on children's peer interactions. For example, only children aged 3 to 5 years attended the preschool, ensuring that a number of same-age peers were available for children to play with as well as the opportunity to play with selected peers. Play with peers is characteristic of this age group (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). On the other hand, children aged 0 to 5 years attended the parenting program and supported playgroup, and while not included in the current study, many of the children attending at the time of the study were under 3 years of age. The lack of similar aged peers may have impacted on children's ability to practise age-appropriate social skills (e.g., associative and cooperative play) and to form

friendships (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). This suggests programs need to be mindful of providing play experiences and contexts that meet the developmental needs of young children as they progress through simple to more sophisticated social skills development. Ensuring preschool-aged children have opportunities to play with similarly aged children in the program context would promote and encourage the development of social skills needed for effective peer interactions (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010).

***Focus of the programs.*** The focus of the preschool was the child, and activities were often child-driven (Department of Education Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009) whereas the focus of the parenting program and supported playgroup was parent and child, with some components of the programs being adult-initiated and others, child-driven. The parenting program focused specifically on facilitating positive parent-child relationships and did so in an intervention context in which adults (staff and parents) and children worked together in a co-constructed ‘play’ setting (Bex, 2008). While the preschool (and supported playgroup) context seemed to offer more independent child play time, the play setting within the parenting program was designed to be therapeutic and emphasised parent-child play experiences (Napoli & Ellis, 2008). This emphasis, while crucial, may have also limited opportunities for children to develop other important relationship and social skills, such as those needed in peer interactions (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010; McCabe & Altamura, 2011).

**Provision of a social skills intervention within the program context.** Group-based parenting programs in which children spend considerable time with peers (such as the parenting program in the current study) present an ideal situation for actively supporting children’s social development and acquisition of social skills. Kim and Cicchetti (2010) also highlight the importance of focusing on peer relationships in interventions with maltreated children. Children need to be given opportunities to learn adaptive social skills and then be able to apply these skills to social interactions with peers (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010).

As mentioned in Chapter 5, preschool-aged children from one of the parenting program centres (two centres were involved in the current research) participated in a 10-week social skills program (Playing and Learning to Socialise; PALS) during the period of data collection. Evaluations of PALS conducted in Australia and the United Kingdom with disadvantaged or ‘high risk’ preschool-aged children, found the severity of the children’s behaviour problems to be significantly reduced with increases in appropriate social skills although longer-term benefits were not reported (Cooper et al., 2003; Cooper, Paske, Goodfellow, & Muhlheim, 2002; James & Mellor, n.d.). This type of explicit social skills intervention for young vulnerable children in combination with attending the parenting program may provide more comprehensive and beneficial support for children’s social skills development than either intervention alone. However, further research is needed to examine the long-term efficacy of social skills intervention strategies for children who are most in need (McCabe & Altamura, 2011).

**Mothers’ perceptions of social interactions for children.** Mothers in each of the programs reported positive perceptions of the social interaction opportunities for their children with peers, staff, and other parents across the research period in the current study. Similar findings have been reported in previous research on parenting programs (e.g., Mondy & Mondy, 2008c) and supported playgroups (e.g., Needham & Jackson, 2012). While mothers may have valued opportunities for their children to interact with peers and adults, and considered this a benefit for their children, social interaction did not appear to be happening for some children. As discussed previously, there are several explanations as to why this may be so. Perhaps for these children, social interactions were simply not an important feature of their experiences of program participation. Even so, this difference in perspective indicates that what parents and children view as important in relation to program participation may not always match.

## **The Parent-Child Relationship**

The primary focus of this thesis was an attachment-based parenting program. Its aims included supporting positive parent-child relationships, and encouraging warm, responsive parent-child interactions (Mondy & Mondy, 2008a). In addition, the parenting program was designed to promote or support change within families. To this end, it was hypothesised that children's descriptions of home and family life would change during involvement in the parenting program. One such area of anticipated change was in relation to the parent-child relationship.

**Parent-child play.** In the current research, change was found in one parenting program child's descriptions of parent-child play at home. The child spoke about playing with his mother during the later stages of the research when previously he had reported only playing with his siblings. As the parenting program supported parent-child play and actively modelled age-appropriate and simple play opportunities that could be replicated in the home context (Napoli & Ellis, 2008), the change in this child's perceptions of parent-child play at home may be an outcome of program participation. Further, this change may have also reflected a change in parent-child connectedness and a more positive parent-child relationship.

It was expected that such a change would be found for more than one child, particularly since components of the parenting program included structured sessions for parents to learn about play, and for parents and children to play together at the program (Napoli & Ellis, 2008). Play sessions were aimed at supporting the parent-child relationship by encouraging positive play interactions between parents and children (Bex, 2008; Mondy & Mondy, 2008b). Previous parent feedback about this aspect of the same parenting program suggested that parents engaged in more playful interactions with their children following involvement in these sessions (Grove & Robinson, 2008; Napoli & Ellis, 2008). However, in

the current research, parenting program children never or rarely talked about their mothers as play partners either in the program or home context. This implies potential incongruence for families between what happened in the program context and what happened at home, and suggests that skills learned while at the program had yet to filter through to parent-child interactions in the home environment.

Opportunities to view the world through their children's eyes come about when parents observe their children's play (Ginsburg, 2007; Milteer et al., 2012). However, in this situation, the lack of playful, responsive interactions observed between parents and children (even at the program) should be of concern. While parents and children participated in structured play sessions in the parenting program, a greater focus may be needed to create authentic and meaningful parent-child play experiences on an on-going basis. Staff need to actively encourage parent-child interactions in play when parents and children are together and be available to support parents. Conversations with parents in relation to parent-child play should be an on-going process throughout program participation and additional support and resources need to be provided where necessary. Further, program staff should also consider the contextual factors in the home context (e.g., emotional, social, and economic stressors of everyday life that impact on disadvantaged families) that potentially mitigate the transfer from program to home of parent-child play (Milteer et al., 2012).

Parent-child play may have occurred in the home context but it was not mentioned as part of parenting program children's experiences of everyday home and family life at the time of the interviews. Observations of parent-child play interactions in the home environment would have provided another viewpoint to balance children's descriptions. However, from the available data it was clear that some children did talk about playing with their parents at home (i.e., preschool children), and in previous research, children have reported playing with parents as part of their everyday home life (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Maatta, 2012).



Therefore, inclusion of home observations may still not have provided any further or different evidence of parent-child play at home from that provided by the parenting program children in their interviews.

**Connectedness in the parent-child dyad.** Parenting program children's descriptions attributable to other aspects of the parent-child relationship also showed no change across the research period. As the program aimed to facilitate positive parent-child relationships, it was surprising that beyond a reference to parent-child play, additional notions of connectedness within the parent-child dyad (such as expressions of love and affection) did not emerge in parenting program children's interviews even in the later phases of the research. This was very different from the supported playgroup and preschool children's explicit accounts of parental expressions of affection and responsive, warm, and reciprocal day-to-day parent-child interactions (e.g., shared book reading and reconnecting at dinner time). Supported playgroup and preschool children's reflections on connectedness in the parent-child relationship were comparable to themes identified in other qualitative research that has examined children's perspectives of family (see Andresen & Fegter, 2011; Goodnow & Burns, 1985; James, 1999; Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Maatta, 2012; Morrow, 1998; Skattebol et al., 2013).

While tangible moments of parent-child connectedness were not explicitly expressed by parenting program children, they did talk about their parents, particularly mothers, as providing physical care and nurturance (e.g., getting breakfast ready for them, or helping them get dressed). Younger children involved in similar research also tended to provide comparable concrete examples of parents' nurturance when asked about the role of parents (Goodnow & Burns, 1985; Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Maatta, 2012; Morrow, 1998). Taking these previous findings into consideration, the concrete examples provided by the parenting program children in the current research potentially demonstrate nurturance as part of the

parent-child relationship within these families. As explained in Chapter 8, parenting program children were less readily engaged in the ecocultural interview about their home and family life. This should also be taken into consideration when reflecting on the quality of, and any potential changes to, the parent-child relationship in the home context as reported by the children.

**Children's representations of attachment relationships.** To the researcher's knowledge, the current study is the first to explore narrative representations of attachment relationships with children who attended this attachment-based parenting program. The longitudinal design of the current study enabled any change in these narrative representations during program participation to be documented. While little change was reflected in parenting program children's descriptions of the parent-child relationship in the home context, changes in the children's narrative representations showed more signs of change. While there were significant differences between the parenting program and preschool children's scores on the caregiving and attachment scales at Phase 1, these differences between the groups were no longer present at Phase 3. Parenting program children appeared to have 'caught up' in terms of their projections of attachment. Even so, no statistically significant differences were found in scale scores for any group of children from Phase 1 to Phase 3. However, the difference between Phases 1 and 3 in parenting program children's caregiving scale scores suggested a positive trend for higher caregiving scale scores at Phase 3. In previous research, changes to children's narrative representations were found over a 12-month period (e.g., Hodges et al., 2003; Toth et al., 2002). Time constraints precluded longer time periods between research phases and in gathering further follow-up data in the current study, although with more time significant changes in parenting program children's attachment representations may have been found.

Of the three programs in the current research, only the parenting program had a specific focus on facilitating positive parent-child attachment. The program worked with parents to increase their responsiveness and sensitivity towards their children as well as providing appropriate child-centred nurture and protection (Mondy & Mondy, 2008b). Therefore, changes to the caregiving scale scores may have reflected a positive shift in the parenting program children's overall perceptions of safety, care, and responsiveness within their caregiving environments, indicating a potential positive outcome of program participation of an improved parent-child relationship.

However, in general, it was clear from the data that parenting program children's internal working models of attachment relationships remained problematic. There was an increase in representations of attachment behaviour and a decrease in parent and child unresolved vulnerability, but no substantial decrease in odd or frightening imagery. This finding was similar to Hodges et al.'s (2003) research on changes to maltreated children's attachment representations during the first year of an adoption placement. Hodge et al (2003) provided the following explanation: "It appears that aspects of new and more positive representations develop but they do not automatically transform the already established representations" (p. 360).

This study contributes to the existing literature base as current research evidence is limited in relation to studies that have examined changes to preschool-aged children's attachment representations (using a narrative story completion task) during direct involvement in a parenting intervention program (O'Connor et al., 2013; Stronach et al., 2013). Both O'Connor et al. (2013) and Stronach et al. (2013) identify research completed by Toth et al. (2002) as the only study that has done so. The results from the current study support Toth et al.'s (2002) research. Toth and colleagues (2002) found a greater improvement in maltreated preschool children's representations of self and of caregivers when they participated with

their mothers in an attachment theory-informed intervention (Preschooler-Parent Psychotherapy) than in a didactic model of intervention aimed at improving parenting skills (psychoeducational home visitation). While Preschooler-Parent Psychotherapy shares a number of common elements with the parenting program involved in the current research, the most fundamental is the focus on reconstructing mothers' representations of self in relation to others (Mondy & Mondy, 2008b; Toth et al., 2002). It is through this process that therapeutic change is believed to take place, with mothers reflecting on and coming to understand how their experiences of past relationships (e.g., with their parents) continue to shape and influence their current relationships and interactions with their own children (Hoffman et al., 2006; Page & Cain, 2009; Toth et al., 2002). The ASCT results from the current study suggested the potential for the parenting program to facilitate change in mothers' own internal working models and processes thus improving mother-child interactions (Hoffman et al., 2006; Stronach et al., 2013), and supporting development of children's positive attachment representations (Toth et al., 2002).

However, in trying to understand these results, several important points need to be made. First, it must be noted Toth et al.'s (2002) research used a coding system for children's narrative representations specifically focused on children's self-representations, representations of mother/caregiver, and expectations of the mother-child relationship. This was different from the current study in which children's narratives were scored in accordance with the major behavioural systems conceptualised by attachment theory (exploration/sociability, attachment, and caregiving) (Page, 2007). Parenting program children's narratives at Phase 3 contained more appropriate parent-child nurture and attachment behaviour and fewer parent and child unresolved vulnerability themes when compared with Phase 1. These themes fit well with Toth et al.'s (2002) adaptive maternal representation composite variable and mother-child relationship expectations scale suggesting

the different coding systems used in both studies should not be an issue when interpreting the results.

Second, while the parenting program was underpinned by attachment theory (and this informed the work of the therapeutic support group), components of the program were also informed by social learning theory (along with other theories). Due to this, findings from the current research support the existing literature on the efficacy of attachment theory-informed interventions in altering children's narrative representations of their attachment relationships. In contrast, recent research found no reliable change in preschool children's attachment narratives following their parents' involvement in the social learning theory-based parenting intervention, *The Incredible Years* (O'Connor et al., 2013). O'Connor et al. (2013) conceded this lack of a significant finding may have been due to several factors. These included the parent (and not the child) being the focus of the intervention, the number of sessions attended may have been insufficient to cause parenting change that would affect a child characteristic, and the relatively short post-intervention follow-up time may have been insufficient to identify changes to children's representations (O'Connor et al., 2013). This is relevant to the current research as even though the parenting program drew on social learning theory (as in O'Connor et al., 2013), the trend towards change in children's representational models was still most likely facilitated by the program's attachment-theory informed components.

Finally, issues with administration of the ASCT must be taken into consideration. In previous research, children completed such measures in university laboratories (e.g., observation playrooms) or in private settings (e.g., private room within a familiar setting, such as a school or home) (e.g., O'Connor et al., 2013; Page et al., 2011; Page & Bretherton, 2001; Toth et al., 2002; Trapolini et al., 2007). In contrast, in the current study the ASCT was completed by children on-site at the programs. As discussed in Chapter 8, administration of the ASCT was occasionally disrupted by other children or the study child was distracted by

events or people present at the program. Further, in relation to the preschool children, some chose to have their friend present during administration of the task. These issues potentially affected reliability of some children's story narratives and therefore results may not have provided a true account of children's representational worlds. Even so, it was not anticipated that preschool children's (nor particularly supported playgroup children's) attachment representations would change over time as there was no specific program focus on enhancing parent-child attachment. The results supported this hypothesis, irrespective of issues during administration of the ASCT.

### **Implications from the Research**

Several implications of the findings have relevance for policy, practice, and research and these are discussed in the next section.

#### **Implications for Policy**

First, the findings from the research reported in this thesis support the need for continued investment in intensive parenting programs designed to enhance the parent-child relationship and influence positive child development. Parenting program children described changes to the parent-child relationship (e.g., increased parent-child play), although these changes took time (9 to 11 months in the current research). Such programs work with disadvantaged or vulnerable families where multiple and complex factors affect parenting. For parents who are already cautious of government departments and statutory social workers, or who have difficulty trusting others due to past experiences (Darlington et al., 2010), sufficient time is needed to develop supportive and trusting relationships with staff in these programs. Such relationship building is likely to facilitate parents' continued engagement and participation, and to support positive outcomes for children. When programs are time-limited or short in duration, they are unlikely to achieve sustained and significant change for families and children who are most at-risk of adverse outcomes.

Second, findings from studies suggest attachment theory-informed programs are effective in promoting secure attachment (Bernard et al., 2012; Hoffman et al., 2006; Huber, McMahon, & Sweller, 2014, June; Moss et al., 2011; Osofsky et al., 2007; Stronach et al., 2013) and improving representations of self and of caregivers (Toth et al., 2002) in maltreated or ‘high-risk’ young children. The current research also provides some evidence for development and implementation of programs aimed at positive change in young children’s attachment and representational models, enough to warrant the consideration of policy-makers at least in terms of investment in further research on the efficacy of attachment theory-informed parenting programs and their ability to effect sustained change in both parents and children.

### **Implications for Practice**

As identified throughout this thesis, following participation in parent support/intervention programs, it is parents who are often asked to report on improvements they see in their children, improvements in the parent-child relationship, and overall family functioning. Clearly, parents are key informants on changes that occur in their families. However, the views of other significant stakeholders, especially children, have traditionally been neglected. The current research demonstrated that some children perceived change within their home environment during participation in a parenting program. The reported changes supported and complemented the aims and intended outcomes of the parenting program of increased parent-child play and decreased social isolation (e.g., children reported friends coming to play at their homes). Further, as demonstrated in the current research, sustained and meaningful changes to parenting and the parent-child relationship can permeate through to children’s experiences of family life and parent-child interactions.

Children have their own unique insights and perceptions on changes they see occurring within their families, and while these may be different from those reported by their

parents, they are nonetheless important. In light of this, parenting programs need to integrate into their practice consultation with and inclusion of children's views when evaluating program outcomes. Children's perceptions can add value to understanding changes that may occur in families during involvement with a parenting program and can potentially shed light on factors that more broadly affect intergenerational change.

The current research also demonstrated that young children's own experiences are worthy of consideration to inform and support programs designed to benefit children. In early childhood education and care services (e.g., preschools or child care centres), children's perspectives are taken seriously and are included in decision-making, planning and evaluation processes. Early childhood research within these settings acknowledges children as collaborators and experts on issues that affect their lives. Giving children who attend parenting programs and supported playgroups the collaborative respect afforded to children in early childhood education and care services may well strengthen program efficacy.

As was demonstrated in this research, children's experiences can be quite different from those assumed by adults (e.g., parents' views on the value of social interactions for children at the parenting program as opposed to children's own experiences of this), and these experiences impact on children's engagement with the program. Thus making assumptions about children's experiences of participation in parenting programs could contribute to a mismatch between program goals and outcomes.

Further, children's experiences of participation can offer genuine insight to what is important to them in these settings. For example, in the current research play experiences emerged as the most important aspect of children's participation in the parenting program. Children particularly enjoyed playing outdoors (in the sandpit or on the slide) and playing with toys. For some children, this also meant that certain toys held particular meaning for



them in the program context as they were either different from those they had at home or provided a sense of congruence between the program and home settings. Such knowledge can enhance and develop understandings of how best to support children during their involvement in parenting programs. For example, staff could use their knowledge of children's enjoyment of particular toys as a way of developing supportive relationships with them and facilitating children's connections to the program. Further, an understanding of the types of play experiences children enjoyed at the program could be used to support parent-child play sessions. If children are viewed as the ultimate beneficiaries of parenting programs, then considering them as important stakeholders in their own right and for their own experiences is likely to inform and support the programs they attend.

### **Implications for Research**

A number of implications arising from the current study have direct relevance for conducting research with young disadvantaged children and their families. First, the current research demonstrated that young disadvantaged children can and should be included in research and can share their experiences on matters that directly affect their lives.

Second, the project demonstrated the importance of prolonged engagement with the children in such programs as those considered in the current research in order to provide as many opportunities as possible for children to share their experiences. In addition, building rapport and gaining the trust of both parents and children were critical for the successful inclusion and continued engagement in the current research with these families. Thus when researchers engage with young children and their parents, sufficient time needs to be given in the first instance to develop relationships to ensure that the research proceeds in a way that yields valid, reliable, and meaningful new understandings and knowledge.

Third, flexible data collection activities are fundamental to capturing these children's voices in research. The researcher's experiences in the study reported here highlighted the inappropriateness of assuming that any one methodological approach or data collection tool would suit all. Child-focused and participatory research methodologies, such as the Mosaic approach, work for some children in some contexts (e.g., in the current research they worked well for the supported playgroup and preschool children) but may be ineffective at capturing other children's voices in research. Research activities that may be deemed 'fun', 'child-friendly' or 'appealing' by adults, such as child-led photography, may not hold any interest for those children whose experiences we seek to understand. Researchers need to be open to new and different ways of including children from diverse backgrounds and use data collection activities that are flexible and allow for the strengths, skills, and views of participant children to be demonstrated. For example, the inclusion of arts-based research approaches such as drawings in the current study may have been a more familiar and comfortable activity than photography for some children and offered another way to elicit children's responses.

Fourth, being mindful of the broader contexts and interplay of factors that may influence a child's engagement with research was demonstrated very clearly in the current research with the parenting program children. The everyday home and family lives described by these children appeared to be very different from those described by supported playgroup and preschool children. An understanding of how these experiences may affect children's engagement in the research process is very important. Conducting interviews with children while they play is common practice in early childhood research. However, for children whose opportunity to play with an interested and responsive adult is limited, other research methods may need to be used.

In the current research, the most engaging data collection activity for parenting program children was the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT). Unlike the other data collection activities, there was no real difference in children's engagement in this task across the three programs. While the ASCT may be considered 'play-based' (i.e., children use dolls to tell a story), it was administered more formally than the other activities (i.e., children came to a table especially set up for the task), and the researcher was limited in her interactions with the children by the standard protocol (i.e., the researcher told the beginning of the story and prompted the child when necessary but remained an observer during the task). Parenting program children's engagement with this activity may have been due to the projective element of this activity. That is, children did not have to talk directly about their own lives but respond to stories provided. Incorporating some of these elements into other data collection activities, such as interviews, may make a difference in vulnerable children's engagement in the research process.

Further, research has found limited use of decontextualised language during daily routines at home (e.g., book reading, play time, and meal times) in families of low socioeconomic status (Morgan & Goldstein, 2004; Reese, Sparks, & Leyva, 2010). In the current study, the ecocultural interview questions required the use of decontextualised language. Children needed to share details of their everyday home lives removed from the actual physical context (i.e., their homes) with a researcher who had limited information about the situation (Morgan & Goldstein, 2004). In some cases, using the dolls' house as a prop when talking with parenting program children about their home lives elicited more responses than when they played with other toys. While conducting the ecocultural interview in children's home may have reduced the need for decontextualised language, the use of props (such as the dolls' house) as an interview technique may help contextualise the questions for some children.

Lastly, children's positive experiences of involvement in decision-making and consultation within the home environment has been shown to influence children's participation in consultative research (see Cremin & Slatter, 2004). In the current research, some parenting program children's accounts suggest that opportunities to share their thoughts or experiences may not be as prevalent in their home environments as for supported playgroup and preschool children (e.g., being told to be quiet during family dinners as opposed to recounting the day's events). Being asked directly about their opinions or views by an adult may be an unfamiliar experience to some children thus hindering their ability to engage fully in this type of research. At a research level, factors such as these must be taken into consideration when designing research to ensure the effective inclusion of young children whose voices have often been excluded from research.

### **Future Research Directions**

The current research found changes in parenting program children's perceptions of home and family life during program participation. Further research needs to be conducted to determine the extent of change within these families (as perceived by the children) and whether these changes were sustained following completion of the program. Continued follow-up with these children would contribute considerably to our knowledge of children's experiences of parenting programs and the changes that may occur in families during and following participation.

The research also found a positive trend in children's caregiving representations during involvement in an attachment theory-informed parenting program. While this finding was limited, it provides a unique contribution to our understanding of attachment theory and parenting programs and demonstrates the importance of future research into this field. Although the parenting program in the current research was underpinned by attachment theory, other factors may have contributed to this finding. Further investigation of this

particular parenting program (and other attachment theory-informed parenting programs) is warranted to understand fully the mechanisms responsible for changes that occur in children's representational models. In addition, research into the duration of parenting programs/interventions required to modify children's attachment representations would also inform the time required to bring about and sustain these changes.

While the findings reported here provide valuable new evidence in relation to children's experiences of program participation, they are limited to the study programs and research context. To build on these understandings, similar research is required to investigate how children experience different models of parenting support and intervention that are used in Australia and internationally. Research such as this will build a strong evidence base and has the potential to influence future policy development in this area.

Lastly, the current research provides some evidence for what works and does not work in relation to engaging young disadvantaged children in the research process. However, further investigation into the design of research methodologies and data collection activities that provide meaningful opportunities for these children to share their experiences is essential.

### **Limitations of the Research**

While the small sample size recruited for the current study provided greater opportunities for the researcher to spend considerable time with the children at each research site, it does limit the generalisability of the findings. Further, the findings provide insight only into the experiences of a small group of disadvantaged young children within a specific parenting program context. They are by no means representative of children's experiences of all parenting programs or changes that may occur in their families during program participation.

Inconsistent engagement of families with the parenting program (and to some extent the supported playgroup) meant that at some research phases, data was missing for some participant children. However, this was beyond the control of the researcher and issues of participant retention are to be expected when completing research with disadvantaged or vulnerable groups (Bonevski et al., 2014; Pescud, Pettigrew, Wood, & Henley, 2014). As has been considered earlier in discussing findings, other factors (e.g., researcher viewed as play partner; type of questions and their effect on responses provided; data collection activities; potentially limited experience in sharing their views) may have influenced parenting program children's engagement throughout the research. In some instances, these children offered limited or no perceptions on their experiences. This difficulty may have affected the ability of the research to capture accurately any changes perceived by children within the program or home context.

A strength of this study was its longitudinal design, however, the time-limited nature of doctoral research precluded further follow-up of the children and their families. While some parenting program children described change in their families during the later stages of the research, insufficient time may have passed for the other children to perceive changes within their families or for such change to occur. The scope of the research was also limited, particularly in relation to data collection activities being completed only on-site at the programs. Completing some activities (e.g., ecocultural child interview about everyday home and family life) in the child's home may have generated more discussion with some children and provided an opportunity for observations of the parent-child relationship within the home context. However, home visits/observations were considered inappropriate for this project, potentially intrusive, and likely to reduce the willingness of families to participate in the research.

## **Conclusion**

The research described in this thesis sheds new light on vulnerable young children's experiences of participation in a parenting program and their perceptions of change within their families during program involvement. This thesis makes a valuable contribution to parenting program literature, and furthers our understanding of how research can best include and support the participation of young children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The findings bring into perspective children's experiences of participation in parenting programs. The experiences of these children were similar to preschool children's, particularly in relation to play. Aspects of the parenting program context enabled children to engage in various forms of play. Parenting programs have much to learn from what was absent in children's descriptions of program participation (e.g., parent-child play, peer relationships and interactions). However, this knowledge is valuable in that it can be used to better inform programs on how to best support these children.

The findings demonstrated that young children were capable of perceiving change in their families during program participation, and that these changes were important in terms of the program's aims and outcomes for families. This research further emphasised the need for young children (and not just parents) to be key informants on changes they see in their families during program participation. Further, as shown in the data, it appears that attachment theory-informed programs may have the potential to positively alter children's attachment representations.

Lastly, the importance of seeking, acknowledging, and acting upon children's views of parenting programs can never be overstated. As the ultimate beneficiaries of these programs, children need to be afforded the same respect as other significant stakeholders within these

settings. Children have much to tell us about the effect of intervention programs on themselves and their families.



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## APPENDIX 1

### ETHICS APPROVAL FROM MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH

#### ETHICS COMMITTEE

Final Approval- Ethics application reference-5201100804 (D)



Main Study/Ethics x



**Ethics Secretariat** <ethics.secretariat@mq.edu.au>

to Dr, Dr, Dr, me ▾

Dear Dr Gibson

Re: "Through the eyes of the child: Young children's experiences of family change during participation in a parenting program" (Ethics Ref: 5201100804)

Thank you for your recent correspondence. Your response has addressed the issues raised by the Human Research Ethics Committee and you may now commence your research.

The following personnel are authorised to conduct this research:

Mrs Kelly-Anne Baird- Chief Investigator/Supervisor  
Dr Anne McMaugh, Dr Frances Gibson & Dr Rebekah Grace- Co-Investigators

NB. STUDENTS: IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO KEEP A COPY OF THIS APPROVAL EMAIL TO SUBMIT WITH YOUR THESIS.

Please note the following standard requirements of approval:

1. The approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).
2. Approval will be for a period of five (5) years subject to the provision of annual reports. Your first progress report is due on 17 November 2012.

If you complete the work earlier than you had planned you must submit a Final Report as soon as the work is completed. If the project has been discontinued or not commenced for any reason, you are also required to submit a Final Report for the project.

Progress reports and Final Reports are available at the following website:

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics/forms](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics/forms)

3. If the project has run for more than five (5) years you cannot renew approval for the project. You will need to complete and submit a Final Report and submit a new application for the project. (The five year limit on renewal of approvals allows the Committee to fully re-review research in an environment where legislation, guidelines and requirements are continually changing, for example, new child protection and privacy laws).

4. All amendments to the project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee before implementation. Please complete and submit a Request for Amendment Form available at the following website:

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics/forms](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics/forms)

5. Please notify the Committee immediately in the event of any adverse effects on participants or of any unforeseen events that affect the continued ethical acceptability of the project.

6. At all times you are responsible for the ethical conduct of your research in accordance with the guidelines established by the University. This information is available at the following websites:

<http://www.mq.edu.au/policy/>

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics/policy](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics/policy)

If you will be applying for or have applied for internal or external funding for the above project it is your responsibility to provide the Macquarie University's Research Grants Management Assistant with a copy of this email as soon as possible. Internal and External funding agencies will not be informed that you have final approval for your project and funds will not be released until the Research Grants Management Assistant has received a copy of this email.

If you need to provide a hard copy letter of Final Approval to an external organisation as evidence that you have Final Approval, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Secretariat at the address below.

Please retain a copy of this email as this is your official notification of final ethics approval.

Yours sincerely  
Dr Karolyn White  
Director of Research Ethics  
Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee

## APPENDIX 2

### CHILDREN'S INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORMS

**This information sheet was intended to serve as a guide for the investigator to talk through the research with the child.**

Hi, my name is Kelly and I'm a researcher from Macquarie University.

Do you know what a researcher is? A researcher is someone who likes to talk to kids and grown-ups about what's important to them. I like to find out what kids think about their lives and how they feel about different things.

If it's OK with you, I would really like to talk to you about what you think about the parenting program/playgroup/preschool and what you do during the day when you're at home.

There are a few different things we'll do together if it's OK with you. I'll give you a camera for a few hours so you can take photos of the things that are special to you at the parenting program/playgroup/preschool. I'll also have some questions to ask you and you'll be able to take me on a tour of the parenting program/playgroup/preschool.

We'll have a chat about what your day is like when you stay at home with your family and I'll also tell you the beginning of some stories about children and parents and then I'll ask you to tell me what happens next with the help of some dolls.

Each of these things won't take long, about 15 minutes or so.

You don't have to talk to me if you don't want to. If you tell me that you want to stop I will stop straight away and that's fine.

If it's OK with you and your mum/dad, I would like to record what you say on a little recorder and I'll also use a video recorder to record what you do.

Everything you say to me will be just between us unless you tell me something that makes me worry that you are not safe.

Do you have any questions for me?

Would you like to be involved in my research? It's OK if you don't want to. *(If child says no, thank them for letting researcher speak with them. If child says yes, provide them with a consent form to make their special mark of consent and/or confirm verbal response.)*

## Child Consent Form

- ★ I am happy to be in this research
- ★ I know I will take some photos and talk with Kelly during this research
- ★ I have had my questions about this research answered

It is OK by me that:

- ★ My name will be kept private
- ★ I will be recorded
- ★ I can stop at any time I like
- ★ I can decide not to talk to the researcher if I want to

Is it OK to use some of your answers or pictures when I write or talk about my research to other researchers?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

.....  
**My name**

.....  
**Researcher's name**

.....  
**My special mark**

.....  
**Researcher's signature**

.....  
**Today's date**

.....  
**Today's date**



**APPENDIX 3**  
**PILOT STUDY JOURNAL ARTICLE**

Baird, K. (2013). Exploring a methodology with young children: Reflections on using the Mosaic and Ecocultural approaches. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 38(1), 35-40. Retrieved from:  
<http://search.informit.com.au/fullText;dn=266696273633492;res=IELHSS>



## Exploring a methodology with young children: Reflections on using the Mosaic and Ecocultural approaches

**Kelly Baird**  
Macquarie University

**THIS PAPER CRITICALLY REFLECTS** on the appropriateness of the methodological framework adopted in an exploratory study of young children's experiences of participation in their early childhood centre and home environments. The Mosaic and Ecocultural approaches informed the study's methodological framework as these approaches were seen to be complementary and child-friendly. While some of the data collection tools were not as successful in the current study as they have been reported in previous research, there was support for the usefulness of the Mosaic approach as an effective, adaptable and child-focused research methodology. Further, the Ecocultural approach was found to provide an appropriate and meaningful way of talking with young children about their daily routines and everyday home life.

### Background

In recent years, the field of early childhood has increasingly acknowledged the importance of including the voices of young children in research (Moss, Clark & Kjørholt, 2005). Studies have demonstrated that young children are able to communicate their own thoughts, perceptions and interests within a research context, and that their view may be different from those of the adults who are often called upon to represent them (O'Kane, 2008).

The need to respect the views of children along with their right to have a say in decisions that affect them has been enshrined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). The Convention (UN, 2005) recognises young children as capable social actors who competently contribute to all facets of the world around them. This position is reflected in the 'new sociology of childhood', a theoretical model that supports the notion of children as experts on their own lives (Prout & James, 1997).

This reconceptualisation of children as competent in expressing unique perspectives calls into question the common practice of having adults act as proxies for children in research (Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke & Craig, 1996). If we are committed to learning about children's lived experiences, 'we need to elicit their representations and seek information directly from them' (Kirk, 2007, p. 1252).

In order to capture children's experiences, appropriate and child-friendly methodologies need to be used (Graue & Walsh, 1995). Many creative research methods designed to complement young children's competence, knowledge, interests and contexts have been developed including: interviews (Grace & Bowes, 2009); persona dolls (Jesuvadian & Wright, 2009); photographs (Dockett & Perry, 2003); and drawings (Einarsdottir, Dockett & Perry, 2009). However, it is not the case that 'one size fits all' and the appropriateness of the method will depend on the research questions being asked, the social context and the children who will be involved (Dockett & Perry, 2005).

The Mosaic and Ecocultural approaches were adopted to inform the methodological framework of an exploratory study of young children's experiences of two environments, their early childhood centre and their home. Specifically, within these frameworks the researcher was interested in identifying appropriate and effective methodologies for capturing young children's experiences. While an analysis of the data from the study is not the focus of this paper, examples of the application of the data collection tools and measures are used to illustrate the efficacy of these two approaches.

The Mosaic approach seeks to understand children's lived experiences and provides a participatory, reflexive and adaptable research approach (Fraser, 2006). Underpinning

the Mosaic approach is the fundamental belief that children are competent social actors who are experts in their own lives (Clark & Statham, 2005). Further, the Mosaic approach views young children as active participants in the research process.

By drawing on the notion of 'the hundred languages of children' (Fraser, 2006), the Mosaic approach uses a multi-method framework which combines visual and verbal tools giving young children the opportunity to express their views and experiences in many different and creative ways (Fraser, 2006). This approach also draws on social constructivist theory and views children as 'meaning-makers' who play 'an active role in knowledge construction in a social context' (Clark, 2010, p. 10). The emphasis is on children's perspectives being the vehicle for the exchange of 'meaning' and understandings with others (family, practitioners or researchers) (Clark, 2007).

The Mosaic approach combines traditional (observations and interviews) and participatory (child-led photography and tours) tools, thus providing multiple ways for young children to share their perspectives. It seeks to bring together different pieces of information to create the whole picture from the child's viewpoint (Clark & Moss, 2001; Clark & Statham, 2005). Clark and Statham (2005) identified the effectiveness of the Mosaic approach in facilitating the inclusion of the voices of young, hard-to-reach or disadvantaged children whose views have often been unacknowledged through the exclusive use of more traditional methods such as interviews or focus groups, that tend to include only those who are most articulate. Further, the Mosaic approach has been used extensively in research with preschool-aged children, particularly regarding their experiences of the environments in which they participate, such as early childhood learning and care environments (Clark & Moss, 2001; Harcourt, 2008; Stephenson, 2009).

The Ecocultural approach reflects a theoretical perspective developed by Gallimore, Weisner and colleagues from the Sociobehavioural Research Group at UCLA (Gallimore, Weisner, Bernheimer, Guthrie & Nihira, 1993; Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman & Bernheimer, 1989). It draws on anthropological, cross-cultural human development research and sociocultural and activity theory (Gallimore et al., 1989). More specifically it brings together a person's ecology or environment with their culture; the beliefs, meanings and values that a cultural community such as a family learn and share (Bernheimer, Gallimore & Weisner, 1990). Gallimore et al. (1993) propose that the creation of a sustainable and meaningful daily routine of family life is universal and is the major adaptive task facing families. Within Ecocultural theory, these daily routines and their interactions are labelled as activity settings.

Activity settings are seen to facilitate children's learning and development through modelling and engaging in tasks where there is a shared goal (Gallimore et al., 1989).

These include the everyday parent-child interactions such as eating dinner, watching television or getting ready for bed as well as those that might more directly aim to facilitate learning such as reading a book together or visiting a museum (Gallimore et al., 1989). Five key components or variables constitute activity settings: who is present, the values and goals of those present, what tasks are being performed, why they are being performed (the motives and feelings surrounding the action) and what scripts govern interactions, including those that shape and constrain the child's participation (Gallimore et al., 1989). These elements within activity settings provide the evidence for examining the coming together of a person's environment and culture (Gallimore et al., 1989).

Thus the Ecocultural approach argues for the importance of exploring a family's daily routines as the critical unit of analysis to understanding how families decide what is important to them, make decisions, respond to the forces around them, and change over time (Gallimore et al., 1993). A child interview employing this approach gives focus to how children perceive their daily routines and understand their everyday home life. It was anticipated that an understanding of the child's everyday home life would be facilitated through the use of an Ecocultural interview, in the absence of direct home observations, either to avoid the sense of intrusion or where research resources limit the use of such methods.

The Ecocultural approach has not been used widely in previous research with children. One reason for this may be that there is currently very little research seeking to understand children's perspectives of home life. Nonetheless, in their study examining young children's experiences of prior-to-school care settings, Grace and Bowes (2009) highlighted the value of such an approach when interviewing young children.

The current paper reflects on using both the Mosaic and the Ecocultural approaches as complementary, child-friendly methods for exploring young children's experiences of their environments.

## Method

### Design and research context

This methodological and exploratory study was designed within the context of a larger study that will investigate the experiences of young children participating with their mothers in a centre-based parenting program for families experiencing social disadvantage. For this reason, the current study was conducted at an early childhood centre located in the same demographic area in Western Sydney in which the larger study will be conducted. An early childhood centre was chosen for the research, as it paralleled to some extent young children's participation in the parenting program



identified, which is intensive, centre-based and where children attend several days per week and participate in structured and unstructured learning activities.

### **Ethical issues**

Before commencing the study, ethical approval was granted by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee and the UnitingCare NSW.ACT Research Advisory Group.

Following the informed consent of their parents, a specific child information and consent form was used to talk with the children about the research, including information about the activities ('I'll give you a camera so you can take photos of the things that are special to you at preschool'), recording of the data ('If it's okay with you and your mum/dad, I would like to record what you say on a little recorder'), and confidentiality ('Everything you say to me will be just between us unless you tell me something that makes me worry you are not safe'). All of the children's questions were answered before they were invited to participate in the research. Children who chose to participate were provided with a consent form to make their special mark of consent (their name or a drawing).

As children are potentially more vulnerable to the unequal power relationships that can exist between child participants and adult researchers (Punch, 2002), a number of steps were taken to address this issue. During the consent process and throughout the research, children were reminded that they could withdraw from the research at any time without consequence and were free to decline to participate in any activity or answer any question that they did not wish to. Further, children were free to decide where the activities took place within the centre and the researcher ensured she always sat on the same level as the child (usually on the floor).

### **Participants**

Six three- and four-year-old children (two males and four females) were recruited for the study. The average length of their enrolment at the centre was just over one year (ranging from five months to two years) with an average of three attendance days per week (ranging from two days to five days). Throughout this paper pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the children.

### **Measures**

#### **Young children's experiences of their early childhood centre**

A number of activities were adapted from those developed by Clark and Moss (2001) for the Mosaic approach to explore the children's experiences of their early childhood centre. Each of these activities contributed to the overall 'mosaic' of the children's experiences and provided an opportunity to triangulate the findings.

*Photography and photo-book making.* Each of the six children was given a digital camera for a three-hour block one morning and were invited to photograph what was important to them at the centre, such as objects, places, toys, activities or people. The photographs were uploaded onto a laptop computer, and the children compiled electronic photo-books using their own photographs. For ethical reasons, to protect the privacy of family members, the children did not use cameras in the home environment.

*Child-led tours and map-making.* The children were also given an opportunity to take the researcher on a tour of the centre. It was intended that the children would record their tour by drawing pictures, taking photographs and audio-recording what was being said. The information collected on these tours would be used by the children and the researcher to collaboratively create visual maps of the centre. The purpose of the tours was for the children to actively 'guide' the researcher around the centre, indicating the important features from their perspective.

*Child interview.* The children were invited to participate in a short, semi-structured interview based on key themes including what sorts of things the children do at the centre, the role of adults, and favourite and least favourite activities.

*Researcher observations.* Observations were also completed to provide information to supplement the data collected from the children. The observations also served as a point of reference at times for discussion with the children during data collection.

#### **Young children's experiences of their everyday home life**

*Ecocultural child interview.* The children were invited to participate in a short, semi-structured interview that explored their family's daily routines. This interview focused on key family 'activity settings' (activities that make up a child's daily routines) (Gallimore et al., 1993) such as getting up in the morning (what happens when you get up in the morning?), eating dinner (what happens at dinner time?) and playtime (is there someone you play with?). The primary objective was to understand how the children perceived the activities that made up their day. It is acknowledged that, ideally, this interview would have taken place in the child's home environment, particularly as this may have facilitated a greater insight into the child's lived experience of their home life. Home visits, however, were not included in the research design as the early childhood centre was accessed by families considered more likely to be at-risk and socially disadvantaged and it was thought that some might experience a sense of intrusion.

## Analysis

For the critical reflection on the methodology, an inductive thematic analysis was used to identify its efficacy in relation to emergent data themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Clark and Moss (2001) suggest that piecing together the various parts of the Mosaic will provide a greater level of understanding about young children's experiences. Combining the data from the narratives (interview data and researcher observations) with the images (photographs and photo-books), allowed for key themes to be revealed and provided a more holistic understanding of the experiences of each individual child as well as of the group within the early childhood centre.

The children's Ecocultural interviews were individually analysed based on the identified activity settings (for example, getting up in the morning, eating dinner and play time) and its five key features (people present, the values and goals of those present, the tasks being performed, the purposes or motives of the participants and the scripts governing interactions). Once this was completed, the children's interviews were compared, to identify any themes that emerged for all of the children involved.

## Reflection and discussion on methods

### Young children's experiences of their early childhood centre

Each of the children involved in the study had their own unique experiences of attending the centre and they were able to share their views, particularly about the aspects they liked and did not like, their friends, and the adults who helped them. The experiences relayed by the children were often related to current or recent situational events. For example, Kate, a three-and-a-half year-old girl said, 'I don't like it here when I have a headache'. The most likely interpretation of this comment was that it reflected an incident that occurred earlier in the day when some building blocks fell on her head.

### Photography and photo-book making

All of the six young children quickly learned how to use the digital camera after an initial demonstration, and they enthusiastically commenced taking photographs. The number of photographs taken by each child ranged from 32 to 125, with most children keeping the camera with them for the duration of the centre's morning activities (about three hours). Most of their photographs were of other children, the adult workers, or toys and activities from around the centre. The children were excited about being allowed to use the camera, as at the time only the adult workers had access to a camera. Further, the study children taught other children how

to use the camera and would get their friends to take photos of them. As the camera was digital, there was no limit to the number of photographs the children could take and they enjoyed the immediacy of viewing their photographs on the in-built camera screen. The benefit of using digital cameras as opposed to disposable cameras has been identified in previous research (see Clark, 2010; Greenfield, 2011; Stephenson, 2009).

In the current study, inviting children to photograph what they thought was important appeared a valid tool for communicating their preferences, as these visual representations were largely mirrored in interview responses and consistent with the researcher's observations. For example, David, a four-year-old boy, took several photos of the reading corner. When asked why he was taking these photos, David stated, 'I like sitting on the lounge and reading books'.

While photography proved to be an effective method for all of the children to communicate their perspectives, it proved to be a particularly useful discussion prompt with those children who did not respond as well during some of the other activities. For example, Alice (three-and-a-half-years) who was mostly unresponsive during the interview, talked about playing with the 'bead thing' as what she liked best about coming to the centre, after reviewing a number of photographs she took of an abacus toy. While one value of the children's photographs lies in their ability to prompt discussion, they tell only a partial story, and it is the children's explanations that provide a more complete picture (Einarsdottir, 2005).

Unlike previous research (such as Greenfield, 2011; Stephenson, 2009), the photo-book making was completed approximately 30 minutes after the children finished taking their photographs. It was felt that limiting the time lapse between the two activities would be most beneficial in helping young children recall and talk about their photographs (Clark, 2010). This also meant the photographs were viewed electronically on a laptop computer rather than given to the children as printed copies. While some children were happy choosing their favourite photographs, it was somewhat more challenging to engage them in conversation about what the photographs meant to them. Many of the children pointed at and named their friends or teachers who were pictured but provided no more detail when prompted to describe the photograph. While the children may have intended for their photographs to capture the image of their friends and adult workers, the lack of further information provided may have also been a reflection on the wording of the questions (for example, asking a child to describe a photograph might only elicit basic descriptions). Re-visiting the photographs with the children over several days or weeks might have also provided richer data than having only an initial conversation.



### Child-led tours

Child-led tours were not very successful in this study. This was surprising (and somewhat disheartening), as tours have been used effectively in research conducted in other early childhood settings (for example Clark, 2010; Dockett & Perry, 2003). The participant children were often too easily distracted by other children and by the centre-based activities that were taking place at the same time. Factors associated with the context and set-up of this particular early childhood centre (such as limited space, structure of the centre's routine, and the number of children present) may also have had an impact. This activity may better be suited for completing in pairs or small groups (depending on the particular children involved).

### Interviews

Initially a small space ('Kelly's Corner') was set up in the early childhood centre with the idea that this would be where the children participated in a number of the data collection activities. However, this was quickly done away with. The interviews, in particular, became conversations with the children that occurred wherever they were in the centre, such as playing with a dump truck in the dirt or sitting at a child-sized table and chairs at lunchtime. While most of the conversations occurred with individual children, occasionally another child would join in and add their thoughts. This provided richer data as the children discussed among themselves their thoughts and views about particular aspects of attending the early childhood centre. This observation supports the findings from other early childhood studies (Clark, 2010; Dockett & Perry, 2003), where small-group interviews or focus groups have been used effectively.

### Young children's experiences of their everyday home life

Most of the children were able to talk about some of the activities or routines that made up their everyday home life. For example, Kate spoke about her grandma helping her get ready in the morning before dropping her off at the centre. She also mentioned she used to sleep at her grandma's, but that she 'don't sleep there anymore'. These small pieces of information highlighted some aspects of the everyday routines of home life and how these might change significantly for individual children over time.

Although in this current study children were asked about their everyday home life on days they did not attend the centre, occasionally children would talk about what happened on the days they did attend (particularly with the child who attended the early childhood centre five days a week). This confusion could have been reduced in the interviews by not attempting to differentiate between centre and non-centre days. This confusion may also

have been reduced if the interviews were conducted in the child's home environment. However, as mentioned earlier, this was not deemed appropriate. While this is a limitation, conducting the Ecocultural interviews at the early childhood centre still provided data about the children's home lives that was meaningful.

### Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the potential of both the Mosaic and the Ecocultural approaches as an appropriate method for capturing young children's experiences of their environments.

In the current study, some aspects of the Mosaic approach were not as successful as in previous research. On reflection, this was mostly owing to the research design, such as contextual and time constraints, rather than the characteristics of these particular tools. The importance of time and flexibility cannot be understated when using this approach. Re-visiting with the children the pieces of information and material collected over time is far more likely to build a complete picture from the child's viewpoint.

The Ecocultural approach offered a different and innovative way of talking with young children about their everyday home life. This current study further illustrated the potential for using an Ecocultural interview to capture children's lived experiences.

Finally, the Mosaic and Ecocultural approaches as adopted in this research were complementary and readily implemented overall. While additional research is needed, this current study draws attention to the potential for young children to competently contribute to research about their environments through the use of an appropriate mix of data collection methodologies.

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**APPENDIX 4**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY**

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**ID Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

**PARENT/ CARER DETAILS**

**1. Name\*** \_\_\_\_\_

**2. What year were you born?\***

1	9		
Year			

**3. What is your gender?\***

- ☐ Male  
☐ Female  
☐ Intersex

**4. Date of interview:**

Day	

Month	

2	0	1	
Year			

**5. Contact details:\***

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Postcode: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact phone number: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**6. What is your relationship to the study child?**

- ☐ Mother  
☐ Father  
☐ Step-mother  
☐ Step-father  
☐ Aunt  
☐ Uncle  
☐ Grandparent  
☐ Foster carer  
☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

7. In which country were you born?\* \_\_\_\_\_
8. Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?\*
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, Aboriginal
- ☐ Yes, Torres Strait Islander
- ☐ Yes, both
9. Which ethnic/ cultural group do you identify with? (e.g., Australian; Chinese; Indian) \_\_\_\_\_
10. What was the highest year of school you completed or are currently attending:\*
- ☐ Year 12 or equivalent/ Senior secondary
- ☐ Year 11 or equivalent
- ☐ Year 10 or equivalent/Junior secondary
- ☐ Year 9 or equivalent
- ☐ Year 8 or equivalent
- ☐ Year 7 or equivalent
- ☐ Did not attend secondary school but finished primary school
- ☐ Attended primary school but did not finish
11. Since leaving school, what qualifications have you completed or enrolled in? (Please tick as many boxes as appropriate):\*
- ☐ School certificate
- ☐ Higher School Certificate
- ☐ Community College
- ☐ TAFE/Vocational Education (e.g. trade certificate)
- ☐ Undergraduate (e.g., Bachelor's degree)
- ☐ Postgraduate (e.g., Masters degree)

## STUDY CHILD DETAILS

1. Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Child's date of birth?

Day		Month		Year			

3. Does this child live with you?

- ☐ All of the time
- ☐ Some of the time

If some of the time, please specify:

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What language(s) are spoken to your child at home or elsewhere?\*

- ☐ English only
- ☐ Mostly English and plus another language (please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- ☐ Mostly another language plus English (please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)



**5. If this child lives with you, who else lives at home with this child right now?**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Relationship to child</b>	<b>DOB (if sibling)</b>	<b>Does this person also attend [parenting program]?</b>

**6. How would you best describe your home (for study child who lives with parent)?**

- ☐ Apartment/ unit
- ☐ Townhouse
- ☐ House
- ☐ Mobile home
- ☐ Other? \_\_\_\_\_

**7. Does your home have an outdoor play area? (e.g.: yard or courtyard)**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX 5

### PARENT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORMS

#### **What is the research about?**

My name is Kelly Baird and I am interested in understanding young children's views about their experiences of attending [parenting program] as well as their experiences of family change over time. I will be visiting the [parenting program] for approximately 6 weeks every 4 months over a 12 month period.

#### **What will your child be doing?**

If you consent to your child participating, he/she will take part in a number of activities every 4 months over a 12 month period. These activities are:

*1. Your child's experiences of the [parenting program]*

Your child will take some photos of the things that are special to them at the [parenting program]. I will talk with your child about their photos and about their time at the [parenting program]. Your child will also be invited to take me on a tour to tell me about the [parenting program's] important features. Some of these activities will be completed in small groups.

*2. One-on-one interview*

I will have a conversation with your child about what happens during the day when they are at home with you.

*3. Story activity*

I will tell your child some stories about everyday situations between parents and children such as a child spilling their juice. I will then ask your child to show me and tell me what happens next in the story using dolls as props.

Each of these activities will take about 15 minutes and your child is free to stop at any time they want to.

*I will ask you to complete a brief questionnaire about yourself, your family, your home and your time at the [parenting program].*

I will audio record what your child says during the interviews using a digital voice recorder. During the story activity, I will also video record your child. These recordings will only be used during analysis and will be stored in a secure location. If you wish for your child not to be recorded, please let me know. I will always ask your child for permission too.

Your child will receive a professionally printed photo book of all their photos as a small thank you gift for participating.

Everything your child does and says will remain completely confidential except as required by law, (they say or do something that suggests they are being hurt or are unsafe) in which case I will need to let [parenting program] staff know of my concerns.

Your child's participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw your child from further participation in the research at any time without having to give a reason and without consequence.

**What will happen with the information your child gives me?**

The information your child gives me will be confidential and only the people in the research team will have access to it. The information from your child will be used for reports, publications and presentations however no information about your child or your family will be used in any way that reveals your identities. No names will appear in any reports or publications. All parents will receive a summary of the research findings, and I will return to the [parenting program] to talk to the children and tell them about what I learned from them once the research is complete.

**What will happen if your child doesn't want to do the activities or appears upset?**

I will do all I can to ensure that this is a fun experience for your child. However, staff from the [parenting program] will be present before, during and after the research to support and talk with your child. If you consent to your child participating, I will also spend time talking with them about the research and how their information will be used. Your child is free to withdraw themselves from the research if they don't want to participate and can stop at any time.

**What do you need to do?**

It would be great for you to talk with your child about the research. I'll also ask you to complete a consent form if you're happy for your child to participate.

**Who can you talk to for more information?**

Feel free to talk with [parenting program] staff or contact myself or my supervisor from the Institute of Early Childhood at Macquarie University:

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Institute of Early Childhood  
Ph.: (02) 9850 8352  
Email: [kelly-anne.baird@students.mq.edu.au](mailto:kelly-anne.baird@students.mq.edu.au)

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Principal Supervisor  
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Ph.: (02) 9850 9828  
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This study has been given ethical approval by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. If you wish to make a complaint or have any ethical concerns about your child's participation in the study, you can contact the Human Research Ethics Committee through the Director, Research Ethics (phone 9850 7854; email [ethics@mq.edu.au](mailto:ethics@mq.edu.au)). The Director will follow up your concerns without revealing who you are and you will be told of the outcome.

## Parent Consent Form

I, ....., give consent to the participation of my child  
..... in the study titled *Through the Eyes of the Child:  
Young children's experiences of family change during participation in a parenting program.*

In giving my consent, I acknowledge that:

1. I understand what happens during the study, how my child will be involved, and how my child's information will be used have been explained to me and my child. Any questions my child or I have about the study have been answered to our satisfaction.
2. I have read (or have had read to me) the information sheet and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my child's involvement in the study with the researchers and the staff at [parenting program].
3. I have talked with my child about the study and my child agrees to their participation.
4. I understand that my child's participation in the study is voluntary. I understand that I can withdraw my child (or my child can withdraw themselves) from the study at any time without giving a reason and without consequence.
5. I understand that my child's information will be kept confidential and that no information about my child or my family will be used in any way that reveals our identity.
6. I understand that some of the activities will be audio or video recorded during the study. I also understand that I or my child can ask that this not happen.
7. I am happy for my child's data, such as written or verbal quotes, photos (not of people) and maps or drawings that do not reveal their identity to be used in presentations and publications about this study.

I have been given a signed copy of the consent form to keep.

.....  
**Signature of parent**

.....  
**Please PRINT name**

.....  
**Date**

.....  
**Signature of researcher**

.....  
**Researcher's name**

.....  
**Date**

## APPENDIX 6

### CHILD INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

The following interview script was used as a guide during the interviews. Further questions were asked as a result of the responses given by the children.

*Questions to be asked about children's experiences of the parenting program/playgroup/preschool:*

1. Why do you come to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool?
2. What sorts of things do you do when you're at the parenting program/playgroup/preschool?
3. What do you like best?
4. What don't you like about being here?
5. Who are the grown-ups who help you the most?
6. How do they help you?
7. Where is your favourite place at the parenting program/playgroup/preschool?
8. Which part of the parenting program/playgroup/preschool don't you like?
9. What do you find difficult or hard?
10. Do you have some friends? What do you like doing with them?
11. What has been your best day at the parenting program/playgroup/preschool?

Please note: The above questions are based on an interview schedule developed by Clark and Moss (2009) to talk with children about their experiences of early childhood educational settings.

*Questions to be asked during review of photos taken by children:*

1. Can you tell me what this photo is of?
2. What do you like about this photo?
3. Do you think the other children like/dislike this as well?
4. Is this an important place/person/thing of the parenting program/playgroup/preschool for you? If so, how come?

## APPENDIX 7

### MOTHER-COMPLETED SURVEY ON CHILDREN'S PROGRAM

#### PARTICIPATION

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

ID Number: \_\_\_\_\_

1. When did you and your child (or children) begin coming to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool?  
\_\_\_\_\_ (month) \_\_\_\_\_ (year)

2. How often do you and your child (or children) attend the parenting program/playgroup/preschool?
- ☐ Three times per week
  - ☐ Twice per week
  - ☐ Weekly
  - ☐ Fortnightly
  - ☐ Monthly
  - ☐ Other
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

3. Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

- a. I like my child (or children) coming to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool because of the social interaction they have with the other children

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	

- b. I like my child (or children) coming to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool because of the social interaction they have with the other parents

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	

- c. I like my child (or children) coming to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool because of the social interaction they have with the workers

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	

disagree

agree

- d. I like my child (or children) coming to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool because of their friendships with the other children

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	

- e. I like my child (or children) coming to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool because they get to do messy play (for example, play that involves water; sand)

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	

- f. I like my child (or children) coming to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool because they get to do physical play activities (for example, running around outside; playing on playground equipment; playing with balls)

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	

- g. I like my child coming to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool because they get to do creative play (for example, painting; playing with play dough; using building blocks)

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	

- h. I like my child coming to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool because they get to do imaginative play or pretend play (for example, playing dress ups; playing 'shop')

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	

- i. I like my child (or children) coming to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool because they participate in group activities

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	

- j. I like my child (or children) coming to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool because of the development or early learning activities (for example, language development; early literacy; recognising letters or numbers)

1	2	3	4	5	NA
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	

- k. Are there any other reasons you like your child (or children) coming to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool? Please describe.

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1	2	3	4	5	NA
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	

4. Is there anything you do differently at home now since you've been attending the parenting program/playgroup/preschool? Please describe.

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Thank you!



## APPENDIX 8

### LIFE EVENTS SURVEY

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

ID Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Have you experienced any of the following events?**

Event	Yes, in the last 12 months	Yes, more than 12 months ago	N/A
Major personal illness			
Major personal injury			
Major surgery			
Birth of a child			
Having a child with a disability or serious illness			
Starting a new, close personal relationship			
Getting married (or starting to live with someone)			
Problem or breakup in a close personal relationship			
Divorce or separation			
Becoming a sole parent			
Increased hassles with parents			
Serious conflict between members of family			
Parents getting divorced, separated or remarried			
Death of a partner or close family member			
Death of a child			
Stillbirth of a child			
Miscarriage			
Death of a close friend			
Difficulty finding a job			
Return to study			
Beginning/resuming work outside the home			
Distressing harassment at work			
Loss of a job			
Partner losing a job			
Decreased income			
Natural disaster or house fire			
Major loss or damage to personal property			
Being robbed			
Involvement in a serious accident			
Being pushed, grabbed, shoved, kicked or hit			
Being forced to take part in unwanted sexual activity			
Legal troubles or involvement in a court case			
Family member/close friend being arrested/in gaol			
None of these events			

## APPENDIX 9

### CHILD INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: ECOCULTURAL INTERVIEW

The following interview script was used as a guide during the interviews. Further questions were asked as a result of the responses given by the children. These questions focus on key areas of the children's daily routines at home.

#### Questions

I'm going to ask you some questions about what you do during the day when you're at home. Would you be able to tell me a little bit about what you do during the day? *(After this initial question, the following questions will be used to talk in more depth with the child about their family's daily routine.)*

#### 1. Getting ready in the morning

- What happens when you get up in the morning?
- Is there someone who helps you get ready in the morning?
- Are there other things you wish you could do in the morning?
- Are the mornings you don't go to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool different to those when you do go to the parenting program/playgroup/preschool?

#### 2. Day time

- What are the things you do during the day?
- Where do you go during the day?
- Who do you spend time with during the day?
- What do you like about the things you do during the day?
- What don't you like about the things you do during the day?
- Are there other things you wish you could during the day?

#### 3. Play time

- What sorts of things do you like to do when you play?
- What's your favourite thing to play?
- Do you play this often?
- Is there someone you play with?
- Where do you play?
- Is there a special time of the day just for play time?
- What's your favourite/ least favourite things about play time?

#### 4. Dinner time

- What are you doing when dinner is being made?
- What happens at dinner time?
- Is there someone you eat dinner with?
- Where do you eat dinner?
- What do you like about dinner time?
- Is there anything you don't like about dinner time?
- What sorts of things do people say when you are eating dinner?

5. Bed time

- What do you do to get ready for bed?
- Is there someone who helps you get ready for bed?
- What's your favourite/ least favourite part about going to bed?

When relevant and appropriate, children will also be asked the question “why do you think this happens.”

## APPENDIX 10

### ATTACHMENT STORY COMPLETION TASK

#### Reference:

Bretherton, I., Ridgeway, D., & Cassidy, J. (1990). Assessing internal working models of the attachment relationship: An attachment story completion task for 3-year-olds. In M. Greenberg, D. Cicchetti & E.M. Cummings (Eds.), *Attachment in the Preschool Years* (pp. 273-308). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

#### Key:

E = Examiner

M = Mother figure

F = Father figure

C1 = Protagonist child

C2 = Sibling child

GM = Grandmother

#### Introduction of Figures

- E: 'Look who we have here.' (*Bring out family.*) 'Here's our family. Look. This is the grandma, this is the daddy, this is the mummy, and these are the girls, Jane and Susan and these are the boys, Bob and George.' (*Show them to the subject as you name them.*)
- E: 'Who've we got?' (*Point to family figures.*) 'You know what? I've got an idea. Let's pretend to make up some stories about them. Tell you what, how about if I start a story about our family and you finish it.'

#### Warm-up: Birthday Story (M, F, GM, 2 Cs, table, dishes, cake)

- E: 'Here's their table and what's this?' (*Show cake to subject and wait for subject to name it.*) . . . 'What kind of cake?' . . . 'Yes, it's a birthday cake. You listen carefully to the story. The mummy has baked this beautiful birthday cake and she calls out':
- M: 'Come on Grandma, come on Dad, come on girls (or boys), let's have a birthday party.'
- E: 'Show me and tell me what happens now.' (*Inviting tone of voice; let the subject play with the figures or tell a story yourself if the subject does not.*)

#### Story Stem 1: Spilled Juice Story (2 Cs, M, F, table, dishes)

- E: 'O.K., I think I have an idea for a new story.' (*Put away the grandmother and set out the figures away from the table.*)
- E: (*Shake the box with the silverware.*) 'Can you help me set the table for dinner?' (*Give box to subject, wait until subject has set the table, help if necessary.*)

E: 'Now put the family around the dinner table so they're ready to eat.' (*Wait till subject has placed the figures.*)

(E resumes.) 'Here's our family eating dinner and Bob (Jane) gets up and reaches and spills his juice.' (*Make C1 figure knock cup off toy table so cup is visible to subject.*)

M: 'Bob (Jane) you spilled your juice!' (*Reproachful tone of voice, but don't overdo; turn M toward Bob or Jane, and move her up and down while she is talking.*)

E: 'Show me and tell me what happens now.'

E prompt (if subject does not spontaneously mention): 'What do they do about the spilled juice?' E prompt if subject gives only one response: 'Anything else?', 'What else?' or 'Then what?' If subject performs ambiguous actions with figures, ask: 'What are they doing?' and if the subject uses an ambiguous pronoun when talking about the figures, ask: 'Who was doing it?' E can also repeat the subject's statement in question form, to verify what the subject said ('The mummy wiped the juice? And then what?'). If the subject asks for the GM, say 'She's not in the story, we'll get her out again later.'

Note that these prompts are designed not to suggest precise ideas to the subject. The only exception is the prompt that focuses the subject's attention on the issue (spilled juice) if it has not been addressed.

### **Story Stem 2: Hurt Knee Story (2 Cs, M, F, felt for grass, sponge for rock)**

E: 'O.K. I have an idea for another story. You put our family there and get them ready for the next one while I put these away.' (*E points to the side of the table. It is important that the rest of the family be about 30 cm away from the rock the C will climb.*)

'O.K. Look what I've got.' (*Set out piece of green felt and sponge rock.*) 'This is the park. Do you sometimes go to the park with your mum and dad?' 'Here is our family and they're out walking in the park, and at this park there is this high, high rock.'

C1: 'Look, Mummy and Daddy. Watch me climb this high, high rock.' (*Make C1 climb rock, then fall off.*) 'Boo-hoo (or ouch), I've hurt my knee (*crying voice*).'

E: 'Show me and tell me what happens now.'

E prompt (if subject does not spontaneously mention): 'What do they do about the hurt knee?') For other prompts, see 'spilled juice' story, i.e. ask what the figures are doing if it's not accompanied by speech, ask the subjects to show you what they say the figures are doing. And prompt for elaboration by saying things like 'Anything else?', 'And then what' etc.

If the subject seems to have finished, or becomes repetitive, say:

E: 'All done? Shall we try another? Let's put these away.'

### Story Stem 3: Monster in the Bedroom Story (2 Cs, M, F, bed with felt blanket)

E: 'Can you get the family ready for the next one?' (*Set out the props, if subject does not do it. Again, it is important to have the rest of the family at least 30cm from the bed in the 'bedroom'.*)

E: 'Look what happens now. Listen carefully.'

M: (*Face M toward story C and move her slightly as she speaks.*) 'It's bedtime. Go up to your room and go to bed.'

C1: 'Mummy! Daddy! There's a monster in my room! There's a monster in my room!' (*Alarmed tone of voice.*)

E: 'Show me and tell me what happens now.'

E prompt if subject does not mention spontaneously, 'What do they do about the monster in the room?' If necessary, use other prompts given in 'spilled juice' story, i.e. ask for clarification of ambiguous action, ask subjects to show you actions they simply described, and for elaboration by saying 'Now what?', 'Anything else?', etc. If the subject stops playing, or becomes overly repetitive, move on by saying:

E: 'Are you ready for the next one?'

### Story Stem 4: Departure Story (2 Cs, M, F, GM, felt grass, car)

E: 'Let's use the grandmother this time.' (*Set out family and grandmother at side of table, with green felt and car; it is important to have the car in front of the subject, and the two parents facing the grandmother and two children.*)

E: 'Here we have their front lawn, and here we have their car, this is the family car.' (*Make mum and dad face the children and grandma, with car in front of subject.*)

E: 'You know what it looks like to me, (subject's name). It looks like the mummy and daddy are going on a trip.'

M: 'O.K. boys (girls). Your dad and I are going on a trip. We are leaving on our trip now.' (*Move M slightly as she speaks to the children.*)

F: 'See you tomorrow. Grandma will stay with you.' (*Move F slightly like M.*)

E: 'Show me and tell me what happens now.'

Important: E should let the subject put the figures in the car and make the car drive off. Only intervene if the subject seems unable to make the car drive off. If the subject puts the children in the car say, 'No, only the mum and dad are going.' After the subject (or if necessary, the tester) makes the car drive off, E puts the car under the table, out of sight. If the subject wants to retrieve the car, E replies, 'No, they're not coming back yet.'

E: 'And away they go.' (*As the car is moved under the table.*)

E prompt if subject does not spontaneously mention, 'What do the children do while the mum and dad are gone?' and use other prompts to clarify actions, or actors, and to ask subject to act out what is being described.

### **Story Stem 5: Reunion Story (Same props as departure story)**

Bring the car with the two parents back out from under the table and set it on table at a distance from the family (i.e. keep it near E, so the subject has to reach for it and can make it drive 'home'). If the subject has put the child and grandmother figures in the middle of the table during the previous story, put them back close to the subject to create distance between the returning car and the child figures.

E: 'O.K. And you know what? It's the next day and the grandma looks out of the window (*make grandma look toward car, move her as she speaks*) and she goes':

GM: 'Look, boys (girls), here comes your mummy and daddy. They're home from their trip.'

E: 'Show me and tell me what happens now.' (*Let subject drive car toward 'home', intervene only if the subject does not do so.*)

Prompt if subject does not spontaneously take the figures out of the car. 'What do we do now that the mom and dad are home?' Also use other prompts given in 'spilled juice' story where appropriate.

If the subject asks for other props, like a bed, etc., bring it out. However, do not bring out the grandmother during the earlier stories. Just say, 'She'll come back later' or 'We'll use her in another story later.'

## **APPENDIX 11**

### **CODING SYSTEM FOR THE ATTACHMENT STORY COMPLETION TASK**

The children's story stem narratives were coded using the two-step coding system developed by Page (2007). The coding manual is provided below.



# **Coding Manual for the Narrative Story Stem Technique**

**2007**

**Timothy Page**  
**Louisiana State University School of Social Work**

Acknowledgments: This work was strongly influenced by several people, first and foremost Inge Bretherton. The core codes in this manual were originally developed by Page & Bretherton (1993). David Oppenheim and Nina Koren-Karie's approach to coding their Insightfulness Interview contributed to the structure of this coding system. Ideas for coding attachment disorganization were taken from the work of Green, Stanley, Smith, & Goldwyn (2000). Finally, the code for Good/Bad shifts of parental representations was taken from the work of Hodges, Steele, Hilman, Henderson, & Neil (2000). Thanks also to Rhonda Norwood and Loredana Apavaloaie for their insightful contributions.

## **General Approach to Coding**

The coding system is applied in two basic steps. Level I content codes are applied to story events as frequently as they occur (see more detailed instructions for application below). Each of these codes is applied with an intensity rating (3-point scale), with the mid-level rating of 2 as the default. The level II codes are 7-point rating scales of larger constructs and are based upon the overall effect of the level I codes used. Inter-rater reliability is calculated on the basis of the level II ratings.

## **Using the Level I Codes**

### *Use of Frequencies*

Parsimony is a virtue in coding. Try to use the fewest codes possible to interpret story representations. Sometimes more than one code could be conceptualized to interpret a narrative representation, yet as a rule the single best-fitting code should be applied. Double coding is used, though rarely, when a given representation conveys multiple meanings, the omission of any one of which would seriously impair interpretation. Pay attention to context in coding. When one code is used, and essentially the same action subsequently occurs in the story involving the same figure, even if it is not literally contiguous to the first event, the bias will be in the direction of not using the same code twice, unless the action is so clearly powerful that the only way to adequately encode it is with the application of another identical code. This however happens relatively infrequently. Restraint in the applications of codes is desirable.

### *Codeable Units*

It can be difficult deciding when a representation is distinct and meaningful enough to be coded, differentiating it from earlier representations in the same story, as opposed to when a representation may be more of a repetition of already expressed meanings. Generally, the

longer a narrative becomes, the less likely we will be to code the latter representations because often these involve repetitions of representations already expressed. Repeated representations of one theme are most commonly coded as indicating strength of the representation (so one code at the intensity of 3 is often used where there are multiple frequencies of the given representation). The intensity of a representation, therefore, may be modified, more or less intense, by subsequent representations. We focus on coding representations that appear to carry the main weight of the story, the elements that appear to create the major statements of the story.

### *Procedures: Paying Attention to Context*

It is best to watch a story response through at least one time without stopping to code. During the initial viewing(s), make mental notes about what seem to be the important meanings in the story response. As you watch the story response, mentally organize your interpretation with the 4 basic constructs that represent the level II ratings: Child autonomy/exploratory behavior; child-child sociability; child attachment/secure base behavior; and parental caregiving (nurture and authority), including quality of family interactions. In most cases, there will be 3 or 4 significant events in the story response that appear to reflect the child's intended meanings. After noting this overall "sense" of the story, then replay the child's story and apply the level I codes. It is also best to think about the codable events as sub-sections of the story response, typically consisting of brief interactive sequences. We look for overall meanings of interactive sequences, to evaluate the interactive context of represented behavior, and generally apply codes to these story subsections. After codes have been applied to events, it is best to rewatch the story resolution, keeping in mind the codes that were used, as a final check as to whether the codes adequately capture the apparent intended meaning of the child's story.

There are often representations or apparent personal meanings in a child's narrative that the codes don't completely capture. Highlighted notation of such representations in the transcript can help to guide the eventual scale ratings. For example, in one Reunion story the parents returned and offered a very mild greeting, with no other apparent interaction of any kind. The text was noted as obviously lacking attachment behavior, and this influenced the eventual attachment scale rating.

We don't attempt to code literally everything. When there is great ambiguity about the enactment or the meaning of a representation, it is better to use no codes than to guess at possible intentions or meanings.

Be careful to avoid coding representations that are suggested by the story stem. For example, when a subject child says that the story child is injured in Ball Play, this representation would not receive a code unless the subject child makes a point of clearly elaborating on the details of the injury, in effect going intentionally beyond the information provided in the stem. Similarly, caution should be taken in coding *expectable immediate reactions* to events. For example, when a child in Monster calls to parents (coded as attachment behavior) and the parents come, the simple representation of parents responding by coming as a rule should not be coded. If the parents are further represented as providing some sort of comfort, this should be coded. The sequence of attachment-seeking and parental nurturing is thus particularly challenging to code, and the default decision is to not code parental nurturing in addition to expressed attachment behavior unless there is a clearly elaborated additional representation of this. Likewise, if the mother in Bathroom Shelf asks what happened while she was away, and

thus presents a demand for accountability, and the children admit to breaking a rule, the children's expression of contrition is normally included in the global code for authoritative parenting.

Generally, the level 1 codes consist of positive individual and interactive codes, with their opposite or negative dimension. Descriptions of all positive level 1 dimensions are included here, as are the major opposite or negative dimensions. When negative representations are encountered that do not neatly fit into the constructs described here, a notation of the main positive construct (e.g., 1, 3, 5, etc.) will be given, preceded by a negative "-" sign.

### *Scoring the Intensity Scales*

Three-point intensity scales are used for the level I content codes (not the level II process codes – see discussion of these below). In general, the default intensity scale score is 2, with exceptional clarity, interactional representation, and strength as 3, and minimal or suggested expression as 1. A rating of 3 may be given if a figure is represented in two or more distinct, though thematically related activities, so that the impact is of a very strong representation of the theme.

---

## **1. Child Autonomous Behavior (Competence/Ability/Resourcefulness)**

This code captures autonomy and realistic competence. It is often used for physical strength or agility. These representations may involve, for example, jumping high (though not extraordinarily so – see description below of "dangerous autonomy") or exploration at a short distance away from the "home base". Also included here are references to a child's large size or to growing, motor skills, cognitive skills, age-appropriate abilities for personal grooming and other self-management behaviors, especially as these communicate a sense of initiative and/or autonomy. Child autonomy can include representations of responsible action, like cleaning up a mess. This code is used almost always for individual representations of children, but occasionally, autonomous, exploratory behavior can be represented in the presence of an adult guide (see example below).

Beware of unreasonable or exaggerated autonomy, as in wrestling a monster or flying around with superpowers. This is really dangerous autonomy, a combination of vulnerability with autonomy that suggests that the autonomous elements are reactions to vulnerability. These can be noted with the use of "-1" to signify the opposite of or false autonomy. This will be reflected in a lower rating on the level II exploration scale.

### **Examples:**

Hurt Knee: A child climbs the rock successfully.

Departure: A child goes on a high slide in the park, involving elaborate twisting motions and distance from the parent.

Departure: A child wins at the card game "Memory" that he played with the sibling.

Spilled Juice: the child takes a drink from the pitcher (depending on context, a representation like this may be coded at a low level [1] if it seems more matter-of-fact and not a particularly noteworthy accomplishment).

Lost Dog: The child goes to look for the dog on his own.

Departure: The children accompany grandmother outside, looking for rocks, and eventually find a “whole big pile of rocks”

## **2. Unresolved Child Vulnerability/Endangerment**

This code is used when the child is in immediate danger, dies, or is ill or injured, without resolution or attention to the distress. It also includes situations that suggest vulnerability where a child is shown as separated from the family, as in running away. It may also include representations that significantly amplify a story stem, such as a vivid and detailed description of the injury in Hurt Knee. This code does not apply when the child participant becomes aggressive with one of the child figures (such as throwing it).

### **Examples:**

Hurt Knee: The child participant says that the younger sibling had a big splinter in his knee.

Monster: A monster comes into the bedroom while the child sleeps.

Departure: A stranger comes and frightens the children while they are at the park.

## **3. Child Empathy, Mutuality, or Caregiving Behavior Toward Other Child**

This code is used when children play together, when one child helps or comforts another child who is vulnerable (hurt, sick, afraid, in danger), or when children show affection to each other.

### **Examples:**

Spilled Juice: The siblings go outside to play in the sandbox.

Hurt Knee: The older sibling hugs the younger who hurt his knee.

Hurt Knee: The older sibling helps the younger to climb the rock.

## **4. Child-Child Hostility/Aggression**

This code is for conflict or mean-spirited behavior between the siblings or a friend. Note: The 3's a Crowd story presents peer conflict. If the subject's story continues this conflict (though not embellishing or amplifying it), especially if this is presented in the context of the older child's defense of the younger, this code should not be used (see general instructions above for avoiding codes suggested by the story stem).

### **Example:**

Spilled Juice: After the mother has sent the younger child to his room for spilling the juice, the older sibling attacks and stomps on the younger (such intense aggression would likely be coded as intensity level “3”).

## **5. Attachment Behavior**

This code is used primarily when a child who is sad, afraid, tired, sick or otherwise vulnerable approaches or calls out to a parent to seek help or comfort or achieve proximity. This code, therefore, does not necessarily require that the child figure be placed in close physical

proximity to a parent. This code also includes a child's crying, when this can be interpreted as the expression of a desire for comfort. When the figure toward whom the crying is directed is not clearly indicated, this code will be applied to both the mother and father figures, if they are both present in the scene. However, when one parent has been the actor (e.g., in a situation involving discipline where the crying communicates a desire for involvement and comfort), the crying will be interpreted as being directed to that parent, even if both parents are present. Attachment behavior may include expressions of sadness or anger when these emotions are clearly related to obstacles to a child's proximity to a parent, such as occur during separations or other circumstances where the parent is unavailable. Sadness and/or anger may be expressed, for example, during the separation scene in the Departure story.

On an interpretive level this code can be regarded as child attachment behavior to a parent who may or may not be present. This code may also be used in contexts where a child is placed physically close to a parent figure, including sleeping, but without explaining why and outside an immediate context of vulnerability (e.g. not just after the child has been hurt or has expressed another need). The physical positioning can be the result of a parent moving toward the child, the child moving toward the parent, or both moving toward each other. In these situations the intensity scale score will usually be "1". Also included at the low level of attachment behavior is general help-seeking, e.g., asking for more juice, as contrasted with more emotionally intense help-seeking concerning significant distress, such as the child seeking parents in response to the Monster story-stem, which would be normally coded at the mid-level of intensity.

At times the direction of expressed affection between children and parent figures is not clear, whether this is initiated by children or parents. It can therefore be difficult to judge whether the attachment or parent nurture code should be used. Expressed affection of children toward parents may be included as attachment behavior. In general, we want to avoid automatically coding the parent nurture code when there is an expected and immediate nurturing response to a child's expressed attachment behavior. The context of the story may point in the direction of which code is more appropriate to use. For example, in the Reunion story when attachment behavior and parent nurture are not clearly distinguished by the child's story enactment, the bias will be in favor of coding attachment behavior because the situation involves separation and distress. (Generally, we expect to code, at some level of intensity, attachment behavior in the Reunion story because of the prominence of this theme in this story.) We don't expect to see attachment behavior enacted as frequently for older children (8-9) as for younger (4-5) children.

When an expression of attachment behavior is rejected by an attachment figure, or when it is interrupted and not completed, a notation with a negative sign (-) will be used (see example below).

### **Examples:**

Departure: The children "sneaked" into the car to accompany the mother on her trip.

Departure: Instead of completing the parents' driving away, the child participant returns them to where the children are and says, "They're back!" (this would likely be coded at an intensity level of "1").

Monster: The child runs to the mother to tell her that a monster is in the room.

Reunion: The children approach the parents upon their return.

Monster (coded as -5): The child goes downstairs and calls, “Mommy!”, and the subject then says, ‘I mean, they were all sleeping, except for her [older sister], she was doing her homework.’

## **6. Child Empathic Behavior/Deference to Parent**

Empathic responsiveness by child to parent and asking permission both represent awareness of the parent’s experience, the child takes the parent’s perspective (without what would be considered role-reversal), and behaves in accordance with what the child perceives to be the parent’s wish, desire, or need. The 2 dimensions of this code are used for ratings on the level II constructs of Attachment and Caregiving, respectively.

### **6a. Child empathic responsiveness to parent**

This code is for clear situations where a child responds empathically to a parent’s distress in a way that shows simple concern, in contrast to what could be interpreted as role-reversed care-taking of a parent. It applies when a child comforts or behaves in a considerate manner toward a parent who is hurt, sick, tired or sad. Typically, this will include physical proximity to the parent. This code is expected to be used in the Uncle Fred story, in particular. It is included in the Attachment scale level II rating.

### **6b. Child deference/respect for the parent’s wishes**

This code illustrates a child’s respectful deference, including obedience, to a parent’s wishes or instructions. It also applies when a child complies with a parental request, rule, prohibition, or other behavior expectation. This code also is applied when a child explicitly (verbally) asks a parent for permission to engage in an activity. This code should also be used when the child confesses or apologizes to a parent for a transgression. In all these examples, the common theme is acknowledgement/ respect for appropriate role definitions between child and parent, from the viewpoint of the child figure.

Asking permission is generally coded at the low (1) scale level. The larger construct level II rating will encompass the parent-child relationship more broadly, including both authoritative parenting *and* child deference/obedience. The larger construct thus reflects strong yet flexible parent-child boundaries/authority.

It can be difficult to determine whether a child’s motivation to obey a parent’s stated wishes is a result of empathic responsiveness or obedience to the parent’s authority. In general, when there has been a clear directive from the parent (notably as contained in the stems for the Headache and Bathroom Shelf stories) this code applies to the child’s behavior, in contrast to clearer representations of pure emotional, or empathic responsiveness to the parent’s distress. This code is included in the Caregiving scale level II rating.

### **Examples:**

6a: Uncle Fred: The mother is depicted as sad, and the child participant says that the younger child is “sad too”.

6a: Uncle Fred: The younger child goes on the couch and hugs the mother.

6b: Spilled Juice: The child cleans when the mother asks him to do so.

6b: Headache: The child tells the friend they must not watch t.v. because of the mother's headache.

6b: Headache: The child asks to be allowed to go play in the park.

6b: Spilled Juice: The child apologizes to his mother for spilling the juice.

**7. Child-Parent Role Reversal** (may be either of a caring or punitive nature; can include deception, lying)

This code applies when a child exercises some level of control over a parent. It may include a child ordering or moving the parent(s) around or disciplining the parent(s) (these are punitive examples). It includes noncompliance to clear parental directives and child misbehavior in the presence of a parent. It may include expressions of anger toward parents, and is certainly used when a child is violent toward a parent, and it is used for dishonest behavior, such as lying. It may also include exaggerated caregiving by a child toward a parent. The overall theme is inappropriate role behavior/boundaries from the child figure's point of view. The low intensity level of child-parent role-reversal will include mild hostility and deceit.

**Examples:**

Spilled Juice: The child tells the father to go to his room.

Spilled Juice: After the juice is spilled in the story stem, the child jumps up on the table and jumps up and down, yelling "I want more lemonade!"

Cooking Story: The mother is depicted as being burnt by the pot, also, and the younger child goes to elaborate measures to mend her injury with medicine, bandages, etc.

Cooking Story: The child tells the mother that he did not touch the pot on the stove (when in fact he did).

Monster in the Bedroom: After the mother tells the younger child to go to bed, the younger child says, 'No!' to her in an angry voice. (this would likely be coded as level "1" in intensity, especially given the association of the scene with anxiety)

Spilled Juice: The younger sibling attacks the mother, knocking her down, killing her, then takes her outside and buries her.

**8. Parent Nurture/Caregiving/Protection to Child**

This code applies when a parent addresses the physical or emotional needs of a child, especially, though not necessarily, when the child has experienced vulnerability of some kind (e.g., is tired, worried, injured, or afraid). This code is used when a parent offers help, comfort, or protection to a child, either spontaneously or when asked. (Sometimes, however, protective behavior by a caregiver sounds more like parental structure [#9], such as when a parent tells a child not to touch the stove, or to come in out of the rain. In cases such as these, the bias will be toward using the #9 code, because the immediate emphasis is on the child's behavior, not on what the caregiver provides the child. In contrast, when a caregiver tells a child to come in for dinner, the #8 code is used, because the emphasis is on the care that is provided.)

This code is also used to code praise, granting the child a favor or privilege, affection (even simple greetings, though these are usually coded as level 1 in intensity), and in situations where a parent encourages the child to do something on his/her own, typically an activity involving physical mastery or skill. It is also used when one parent clearly is identified as providing for the entire family, as in preparing a meal or cleaning up a mess, and this is

usually coded as level 1 in intensity. Occasionally, in response to a child's proximity-seeking to a parent, the parent will be shown to respond positively very briefly (e.g., "What's wrong?") with no further elaboration. The 8 code should not be used for these very brief responses to attachment behavior, as these are considered acknowledgements of the attachment behavior and not parental nurturing.

### **Examples:**

Spilled Juice: Mother gives a bath to the child.

Hurt Knee: Mother carries the child up the rock, after the child falls and hurts his knee.

Hurt Knee: Father applies a band-aid to the child's hurt knee.

Lost Dog: The mother searches for the lost dog.

Hurt Knee: Father praises the child for climbing the rock, saying "Good job".

Spilled Juice: Father hugs the child.

Reunion: Mother says "Hi, honey" to a child on returning from her trip. (This would likely be coded as level 1 in intensity.)

Hurt Knee: Father encourages the child to climb the rock again.

## **9. Parent Authoritative Structure or Discipline**

This code refers to parental guidance in situations where a parent directs the child to follow a rule, asks whether the child followed a rule, directs the child to perform a prosocial act or other maturity demand, or provides authoritative punishment. These are essentially imposed parameters for the child's behavior and the code is used to capture appropriate power and boundary that is child-centered, between parent and child.

Authoritative punishment is often expressed as verbal reprimands, assigning time-out, or deprivation of privileges. The representation needs to be a direct expression of punishment, as opposed to what would be called simply "being angry". When "time-out" is enacted, the parent's sending the child to the room, and (if enacted) the parent's allowing the child back out of the room are included within a single use (1 frequency) of the code. This code may also be used for mild spanking, when the spanking clearly does not convey a sense of the parent's hostility or aggression and contains instructive and corrective qualities.

Authoritative structure/discipline may at times appear very close to nurturing protection when the action represents protection of the child. A parent might, for example, admonish or punish one child because that child transgressed against the other child. Code authoritative discipline when the primary action is the enforcement of rule/structure/consequence, and nurture/protection when the action is more focused on the distressed child.

Note how authoritative structure/discipline and the following code (#10), hostility/harsh punishment/abuse, are elements of one continuum. Their dividing line is defined as reasonable and growth-promoting vs. hostile and coercive. The one has the child's welfare as the focus, the other has the parent's self-centered, hostile and coercive needs as the main focus. Hostility (#10) can include milder scolding when this appears out of context and, again, not related to growth-promotion for the child, but is more centrally a self-centered expression of the parent's anger.



### **Examples (Parental Structure):**

Barney: When the child goes to the mother to tell her that the dog is gone, she tells the child to go look for it.

Reunion: On returning from her trip, mother asks the children if they did everything that the grandmother told them to do.

Hurt Knee: Father tells children it is time to come in the house.

Hurt Knee: The father says, "Don't climb that rock again!", after the child has fallen.

Cooking: The mother asks the sibling to get ice for the hurt child's hand.

### **Examples (Mild Punishment):**

Spilled Juice: Mother scolds the child mildly for spilling the juice.

Spilled Juice: After spilling the juice, the child is sent to his room for a short while.

Spilled Juice: The child is mildly spanked for spilling the juice.

Wagon: The child is scolded mildly for not allowing the younger sibling to play.

### **9a. Parent as Powerful/Very Competent/High Status**

This code is used for noteworthy representations of parental abilities, which may be enacted in contrast to relatively undeveloped abilities in children. It is used principally for benign, not interpersonally hostile or violent representations, though it can include protective behavior that is violent toward a threatening outsider.

#### **Example:**

Hurt Knee: The parent lifts up the rock.

Monster: The father enters the room and kills the monster.

### **10. Parent Hostility/Harsh Discipline/Aggression/Abuse to Child**

This code captures distortions in parental caregiving characterized as frightening hostility. It is used for severe physical punishment of a child where the punishment conveys a sense of aggression and hostility and the apparent intention to cause the child pain. It may include spanking, if the enactment of spanking is harsh and fits this description. It also includes abusive parental behavior to a child, which occurs without any apparent connection to child misbehavior. This code is also used for situations where a parent yells at, screams, or belittles a child as a form of punishment. Indirect yelling about a problem is not included under this code. This code also includes situations when a parent engages in violence toward objects in front of the child. When this code is used, the child vulnerability codes are usually not simultaneously used, unless there is clearly an enactment of detailed injury or danger to the child.

Pay close attention to action and verbalization in coding authoritative vs. harsh/abusive punishment. A comment that indicates unreasonable or harsh punishment (e.g., a child can never play with her friend again) in a context that otherwise appears authoritative will likely be coded as low-level harshness.

**Examples:**

Spilled Juice: After the child is depicted as spilling the juice, the mother hits and throws the child to the ground.

Spilled Juice: The father spansks the child several times, with loud noises and a clear intention to inflict pain.

Spilled Juice: The parents scream loudly at the child for spilling the juice.

Reunion: The parents drive home and run over the children with the car.

Spilled Juice: The parent overturns the table and throws the pitcher (not in response to the child's spilling the juice).

**11. Good/Bad Shifts in Parent Representations**

Note occurrences with this code of sudden shifts between positive and negative representations of a parent in close proximity within the same story response.

**12. Unresolved Parent Vulnerability**

This code conveys a sense of imminent vulnerability that may include life-threatening danger, death, or other loss of the parent, without resolution in the story response.

**Examples:**

Hurt Knee: The father climbs the rock, stands on top, but then falls off (emphasis on injury).

Departure: Monsters attack the mother during her trip.

Reunion: Parents are injured on their trip when the car overturns.

Lost Dog: The father goes to look for dog and never returns.

Lost Dog: The mother and father are put into a witch's pot, forced to take "a kind of medicine", and drowned.

**13. Pleasant Family Interaction/Activity**

This code is used for pleasant, mutual activities involving one or both parents and at least one child.

**Examples:**

Spilled Juice: The family eats or drinks together.

Hurt Knee: The family plays in the park together.

Reunion: The family goes on a trip together.

**13a. Defensive Positioning/Huddling**

This code is used for representations of family closeness that convey a sense of vulnerability and seeking of mutual protection. Pleasant family activity is distinguished from this code often on the basis of some sort of pleasing motion or activity in the first case vs. stasis and a sense of need of protection in the second.

**Example:**

Hurt Knee: The family takes refuge from a storm under the rock.

**14. Pleasant Interaction/Activity/Caring Between Mother and Father**

This code includes verbal and physical affection, verbal greetings, other forms of close physical contact, empathy, comfort, assistance, and companionship. It is not used for simple positioning together, but must involve some meaningful activity.

**Examples:**

Spilled Juice: Father offers to help mother clean up the juice.

Reunion: Mother kisses father upon returning from the trip.

Lost Dog: Father looks for the dog, then returns to mother and they touch faces (coded as level 1 intensity).

**15. Conflict Between Mother and Father**

**Examples:**

Mild (intensity level 1):

Spilled Juice: After the younger child is punished, the parents argue.

Hurt Knee: Mother admonishes father for taking the children to the park, where the younger sibling was injured.

Severe conflict:

Lost Dog: After the dog returns, the father abuses the dog, then the mother attacks the father, crashing "into each other."

Departure: As the mother leaves for the trip, she runs over the father.

**16. Distortions of Narrative/Odd/Bizarre Elements/Intrusive & Frightening Imagery**

This code is especially used for representations that are characterized as intrusive, out of context, and frightening. This code is designed especially to attempt to capture the representational equivalent of intrusive, traumatic memories. At the low end of intensity, however, the representations may just appear to be odd and out of place. At the middle and high intensity levels, the representations will reflect more affective involvement of the subject and may appear dissociative and, at the highest intensity, very frightening. This code is sometimes double-coded with child vulnerability, and thus may play a role in the level II rating of Exploration, because the intention is to record a separate tally of intrusive and/or frightening images.

**Examples:**

Hurt Knee: The child goes to climb the rock, but the rock turns into cheese and spoils, and the family replaces the rock (coded at intensity level 1).

Departure: The children run away from home, steal candy at a store, and there is a candy nail in the candy that sticks in their throats.

Bathroom Shelf: The children smoke cigarettes, the house catches fire, the children die, but are replaced with new children.

## **Codes 17 (Coherence) and 18 (Avoidance)**

Codes 17 and 18 take into consideration the basic expected story resolutions. These are presented here, with minimal and more optimal resolutions.

**Spilled Juice:** Minimum expected resolution: There must a caring response (parent to child/family or child to family) (this usually includes cleaning up the juice). There may be mild punishment. More optimal resolution: There is, in addition, a pleasant family activity, such as drinking or eating together.

**Hurt Knee:** Minimum expected resolution: The child's injury must be acknowledged and addressed. More optimal resolution: A parent cares for the child's injury. A parent then assists, encourages, or allows the child to climb the rock successfully.

**Monster in the Bedroom:** Minimum expected resolution: The parents become involved and comfort the child. More optimal resolution: The child seeks the parents, the parents become involved and offer a reasonable explanation of the child's fears, and provide reassurance and comfort.

**Departure:** Minimum expected resolution: Separation from the parent must occur, with some sort of acknowledgement of this, and there must be some activity afterwards (this may include going to sleep only). More optimal resolution: Following the departure of parents, the children engage in positive activity and the grandmother provides caregiving, such as cooking food.

**Reunion:** Minimum expected resolution: The parents must return and there must be a greeting. More optimal resolution: When the parents return, the children seek to be near the parents and there is a greeting with affection, and the entire family engages in a pleasant activity, such as going on a trip.

**Headache:** Minimum expected resolution: The child finds a way to respect the mother's wish for quiet. More optimal resolution: The child resists the friend's insistence and achieves an accommodation of both the mother's wish and enjoyment with the friend.

**Bathroom Shelf:** Minimum expected resolution: The older child finds a way to respond to the younger child's injury. More optimal resolution: The older child violates the mother's prohibition and provides care to the younger sibling (usually in the form of a bandaid from the shelf) but as soon as she returns informs her about his decision and she forgives and praises him.

**Uncle Fred:** Minimum expected resolution: The child expresses sorrow or limited comfort. More optimal resolution: The child expresses sorrow or limited empathic concern, and the mother engages the child in some ritualistic acknowledgement of the uncle's death, typically attendance at a funeral.

**Wagon:** Minimum expected resolution: The younger child is allowed to play. More optimal resolution: The older child firmly takes the younger child's side and an accommodation is reached with younger sibling and the friend.

Ball Play: Minimum expected resolution: The explanation for the child's injury is benign. More optimal resolution: After a benign explanation for the injury, the children engage in mutual play.

**17. Overall Story Coherence vs. Chaos** (rate each story on 3-point scale, with 3 the highest coherence)

Coherence is characterized by a positive story resolution that is understandable, linear, compact and efficient, and makes sense in conveying meaning, vs. one that is highly negative, odd, tangential, rambling, incomplete, highly conflicted, contradictory, or unintegrated.

A coherent story also addresses the story issue directly with a sense of logical sequencing. Coherent stories may involve apparent contradiction in the meaning of representations as long as these are presented as a result of understandable plot developments and make sense in the overall evolution of the narrative.

**1** = Extreme incoherence is usually characterized by high amounts of frightening and/or chaotic images. Incoherent stories often involve a predominance of negative story events, in terms of caring responses. The story may convey feelings of desperation and hopelessness, or have an extremely rambling, random quality. The way in which the story ends is relevant: When a highly negative or incoherent story ends with a negative/incoherent image, despite the presence in the story of some (usually relatively few) positive elements, it will usually be rated with 1.

**Examples:**

Hurt Knee: The subject ends this story with the family lining up like a train, saying "Chugga-chugga choo-choo", falling off the table one-by-one, and, finally, a tarantula poisons them all.

Lost Dog: The child first responds by telling the mother Barney has gone. He then decides to look for him in the cat's litter box. The child then walks down a "steep tightrope" and appears to fall off a cliff, "Ahhh!", off the table. The mother repeats this and the story ends.

**2** = Mixed positive and negative. There are clearly some positive responses by caregivers, though the story may end with a confused or ambiguous conclusion. It is often difficult to determine whether positive or negative images predominate. A rating of 2 may be given when, for example, one parent provides caregiving but the other is shown to be selfish or threatening. Some forms of punishment to children (e.g., withholding food) indicate a rating of 2, provided there are also positive enactments of caregiving in the story. A rating of 2 may also be given for a predominantly positive and compact story that also has a very odd image that stands out, or that seems odd in the flow of the story (i.e., images seeming oddly juxtaposed). A story with a minimum resolution with some type of odd quality will be likely to be rated 2.

**Example:**

Hurt Knee: The child yells for mom, "Help! Help! Mom." The mother comes running, flipping over, and says, "Are you all right?" Then the child shows her his

knee, with a great big cut on it. The mother picks him up and carries him off to the doctor because he has gotten a big splinter in it. The doctor got it out - there was a little blood on it. So mom takes him home and gives him some medicine, and he has to lie in bed. The mother returns to the park, where she and the father have a picnic by the rock.

**3** = The story is positive, logical, and compact, overall.

**Example:**

Reunion: The children both look out and the mommy and daddy came and then they run to them. They all go on a trip. (The grandma had to return to her house.) They speed off to the grocery store so that they wouldn't get hungry when they camp. (Mom goes in and buys groceries). And then they zoomed off to their campsite where mom and dad stayed previously. The baby was scared, so the little girl let her stay in the middle, and she even let her take a little nap on her and she fell sound asleep. They were both sound asleep, happily ever after.

**18. Dismissal/Avoidance of Story Elements** (rate each story, as needed, on 3-point scale, with 3 as refusal to engage in story at all; no observed avoidance receives no rating)

This scale is used for rating the degree to which the child is actively engaged in the story-telling task and addresses the central story conflict presented in the stem. It represents three important elements of the story, the first and foremost of which is the quantity of response to the story stem. Directness of response to the story problem and emotional engagement with the examiner/story are also reflected in this scale. These three story elements are, therefore, assessed simultaneously.

A rating of 3 corresponds with no or very minimal response to the story stem. While there may be some plot elements, essentially there is no direct response to the story problem. The response rated as 3 may be oddly distracting and very short (e.g., in Reunion, the parents jump high into the air and the father stands on his head). An odd, long story could also be rated as 3 on the avoidance scale, if it literally has nothing whatever to do with the story problem.

A rating of 2 corresponds with some positive story element(s), some quantity of response to the story, that addresses the problem, but with significant avoidance in the symbolism of the representations themselves (e.g., hiding, sleeping) and/or in the subject's response to the story. (Note that not all representations of sleeping or hiding are automatically considered as indicators of avoidance. These enactments should be so considered when other avoidant qualities are present, such as a truncated story, flat affect, or minimal level of story resolution.) If the child responds to the story stem by saying, "I don't know", with noticeable hesitation (not, in other words as a brief colloquialism), demonstrates repeated reluctance to engage in the story, or says, "Let's pretend that didn't happen", but goes on to create a response to the story problem, a rating of 2 is used. A story with less than the minimum expected resolution but with some story elements that address the story problem will usually be rated 2.

The child's emotional engagement (vs. very restricted or flat affective response to the protocol/examiner) is also considered in rating avoidance. Sometimes a child provides the

minimum expected resolution for a story, but does so with a very clear, flat affective tone. In cases such as this, the story should be rated 1.

Sometimes a child responds to a part of the story with "I don't know" because the examiner has used a confusing prompt, such as when the child has actually created a response but the examiner prompts as if no response had been given. Such cases should not be considered avoidance.

When the problem presented in the story stem is addressed, with no significant avoidance either in the story representations or story structure, no rating for avoidance is given. This is the default rating.

## **19. Responsiveness Toward the Examiner**

Rate on a 3-point scale the degree to which the child interacts with the examiner with a sense of responsiveness and mutual enjoyment. The high rating is the default. Lower ratings are used for expressions of non-cooperation, provocation, or hostility.

### **19a. Speech Dysfluency**

Rate on a 3-point scale each occurrence of abrupt interruptions of a train of thought, abrupt and intense distractions, "spaciness", and other odd transitions in the narrative. These disfluencies must be of a quality that is beyond the average expectable distractibility and lapse of focus of young children.

## **Rating Level II Scales**

The 3 level II process scales incorporate the 4 basic behavioral systems that Bowlby discussed in his formulation of attachment theory: Exploratory, sociability, attachment, and caregiving systems. They are coded on 7-point scales. Ratings 1 and 7 are clear and unblemished extremes. Scale scores are influenced by elements of these extremes.

When there are no representations of any codes that compose the level 2 scales, the scale rating will be 4.

### **I. The Exploratory/Sociability Systems: Mastery/mutuality vs. Vulnerability/Incompetence**

A rating of 1 on the Exploration scale reflects predominant vulnerability or fear over exploration. The mid-level rating of 4 reflects a mix of fear and exploration or absence of any representations. A rating of 7 reflects free though appropriately regulated exploration and mastery. Factor in the degree to which the representations of autonomy/exploration are free vs. qualified by other representations suggesting compromised autonomy or vulnerability, even if the vulnerability has resolution (and is not coded 2). The vulnerability assessment includes bizarrely frightening imagery that is not necessarily a representation of the individual child's unresolved vulnerability (code 2). Some vulnerability is compatible with very high exploration, after all, it goes with the territory. The score is lower when exploration is represented as dangerous and thus not expressed or inhibited, or when there is an exaggerated sense of independence that suggests endangerment. The highest rating reflects a sense of

autonomy characterized by competence and the positive depiction of the child figure that accompanies this.

Exploration/autonomy will include enactments of peer sociability. The sociability rating is balanced between conflict and mutuality, factoring in behavior with sibling and friend, though in the Wagon story, the scene is set up for a choice between sibling and friend loyalties. The Bathroom Shelf, Wagon, and Ball Play stories are often strongly indicative of sibling empathic/sociability response.

In coding the level II exploration scale, include representations of autonomy in relation to proximity-seeking, in the context of the attachment cycle. So, not only will autonomous mastery be coded, but resumption of autonomous, separate activity will be included as this is enacted within the attachment cycle. Autonomy themes may be interpreted from representations of peer play, sibling interaction, and movement or travel away from the parents. One child, for example, showed strong attachment behavior in the Reunion story then enacted the parents returning to work and the children going on a trip with the grandmother. While these latter representations were not coded directly for child autonomous behavior, a notation of the significance of this was made in the text, and they did contribute to the level II exploratory rating because in this context they represented a return to activity independent of the parents following the expression of strong attachment behavior. Indicators of parent-child boundaries may be interpreted as indicators also of child-parent autonomy, and be included in the level II rating (only if the representation focuses on the child's independent activity).

## **II. Attachment System: Attachment activation and re-regulation vs. Avoidance/absence/interruption of activated attachment**

The level II rating of attachment includes attachment behavior, avoidance, the general nature of response from the caregiver to the child's activated attachment behavior, and indicators of re-regulation following the activation of the attachment system. Children's role-appropriate empathic responding to parents' distress (code 6a) is included in the attachment activation rating. Generally, representations of a completed cycle of attachment behavior activation, favorable response, and the child's re-regulation will indicate a rating of 7 on this scale. Any indicators of problematic elements of this cycle of activation and quiescence will diminish this rating. Attachment behavior is likely to be activated in the Hurt Knee, Monster, Departure, and Reunion stories, with the Departure and Reunion stories as particularly important in the determination of this rating. Avoidance within story responses as well as the child participant's avoidance toward the story protocol/examiner (#18) is included on this scale.

## **III. Caregiving System: Secure roles/parent-child boundaries vs role-reversal/disorganization**

The codes for child deference to parent, parent nurture, parent authoritative structure, child-parent role-reversal, parent-parent and family representations are all elements of child-parent role behavior and boundaries, the caregiving system. Authoritative and nurturing behavior with firm yet flexible boundaries are the positive dimension. Hostile, role-reversed, deceitful, abdicated, or immature/childishly competitive interactions mark the negative dimension. Repeated representations of parent violence toward children, with pervasive incoherent and/or frightening imagery, typically distinguish the lowest rating from other scale points.



Appropriate parent-child roles/boundaries are often especially evident in the Headache and Bathroom Shelf stories. Spilled Juice, Hurt Knee, and Monster stories are often indicative of parental nurture.

Ratings provided for the Narrative Distortions/Bizarre (#16) and Story coherence (#17) scales are included on this scale. These two scales are individually highly correlated, and highly correlated with the caregiving scale. The conceptual connection between these and ratings for caregiving is that secure caregiving environments are associated with coherent organization of experience. The caregiving scale thus represents both story content and the observed narrative process pertaining to coherence. The polar opposite of representational positive caregiving is thus conceptualized as characteristics strongly associated with attachment disorganization.

## APPENDIX 12

### CODING FRAMEWORK: PROGRAM PARTICIPATION INTERVIEW

Construct	Themes	Definition	Examples
Services	Play as the best thing about the program	Children talk about play as the best thing about the program.	"I like to play"
		Children talk about where they like to play and the play experiences/opportunities they like the most at the program (e.g., indoor/outdoor play, toys, art and craft)	"I like to play outside" "I like the sandpit" "I like to play with the toys"
		Children talk about special objects/toys at the program or about toys that provide congruence between the program and home contexts	"I don't have any cars like these at home" "Looks like my teddy"
	Book reading	Children talk about literacy activities, reading books or program staff reading books at the program	"We read books" "Teachers read books to us"
	Mothers within the program context	Children talk about mother-child interactions at the program (e.g., playing with mothers at the program) or what mothers do at the program	"I come here with mummy" "I play with mummy"
		(Does not include the types of help mothers give children at the programs)	"They go in there and talk to people"

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Friendship Networks</b>	Playing with friends	Children talk about playing with friends/other children at the program. Children also talk about the games they like to play with friends	<p>“I like playing with my best friend”</p> <p>“I like playing dinosaur games with my friends”</p>
	Negotiating peer relationships	Children talk about feeling left out/excluded by other children	“Scarlett doesn’t like it when I play with Michelle when she’s here”
		Children talk about being hurt or upset by other children	“I don’t like that people do mean things to me”
		Children talk about program staff as mediators of conflict between children (e.g., staff resolve disputes between children)	<p>“Teachers stop children from doing mean stuff to us”</p> <p>“I tell teachers ‘Andrew hurt me’ or something”</p>
<b>Support</b>	Mothers help children at the program	Children talk about the help/support mothers give them at the program	<p>“Mummy helps me”</p> <p>“Mummy cuts up the food here”</p>
	Program staff help children at the program	Children talk about the help/support program staff give them at the program	<p>“If I fall down, they pick me up”</p> <p>“When I have a sore, they help me”</p>
<b>Connectedness</b>	Feeling connected to program staff	Children talk about feeling loved by program staff or talk about affection between children and program staff	<p>“Teachers give me hugs”</p> <p>“My teachers love me”</p>

## APPENDIX 13

### CODING FRAMEWORK: ECOCULTURAL CHILD INTERVIEW

Construct	Theme	Definition	Examples
<b>Domestic Workload</b>	Mothers help at home	Children talk about mothers helping at home or talk about the jobs mothers do at home	“Mummy helps me get dressed”  “Mummy cooks dinner”
	Fathers help at home	Children talk about fathers helping at home or talk about the jobs fathers do at home	“Daddy gets my breakfast ready”  “Daddy cooks dinner”
	Fathers go to work	Children talk about fathers going to work	“My dad goes out to work”
	Helping at home	Children talk about the jobs/chores they do at home	“I set the table”  “I actually look after the cat”
	Taking care of myself	Children talk about doing things for themselves at home, usually in relation to self-care tasks	“I get myself dressed”  “I brush my teeth”
<b>Connectedness</b>	Playing with parents	Children talk about playing with their parents at home or about the games they play with their parents	“I play with the big toys with mummy and daddy”  “I like playing with my new Lego with dad”
	Playing with siblings	Children talk about playing with their siblings at home or about the games they play with their siblings	“I like to play toys with Tim”  “I just play chess with my brother”
	Fighting with siblings	Children talk about fighting or conflict with their siblings at home	“My sister did this to me and I had to bite her leg”

Construct	Theme	Definition	Examples
Connectedness	Playing alone	Children talk about playing alone at home.	"I only dance with myself"
		Children also talk about the reasons they play alone	"My mummy's too busy and my daddy's ... he's at work"
	Family meal times	Children talk about their families eating meals together.	"We eat dinner together"
		Children talk about the sorts of things family members talk about at shared meal times	"I talk about playgroup" "My mum says shush"
	Loving moments between parents and children	Children talk about love and affection in the parent-child dyad.	"My mummy gives me hugs" "He cuddles me and kisses me" "I love dad"
		Children talk about warm, reciprocal day-to-day parent-child interactions or the practical things parents do for children that make them feel loved.	"I love when my mummy puts the password into the computer" "Daddy snuck out of work ... cause he wanted to be with his kids"
		Children express sadness when parent-child closeness is difficult due to parental absence	"I miss [mum] lots ... she's going to go away for like a hundred million days" "My dad's gone ... I haven't got anything to do with my dad so I'm alone"

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Connectedness</b>	Missing dad when parents separate	Children talk about missing dad (or mum) when parents separate. Children also talk about how life is different when parents separate.	<p>“I miss dad”</p> <p>“I used to do rumbles before bed but now I can’t because dad’s gone”</p>
<b>Friendship Networks</b>	Friends coming to play	Children talk about friends coming to their home to play	<p>“My best friend comes to play”</p> <p>“I’m allowed to come over to theirs or they come over to ours”</p>
<b>Structure of the Home Environment</b>	Book reading and story-telling	Children talk about shared book reading, enjoyment of books, or story-telling at home (including visits to the library)	<p>“Me and dad have a book”</p> <p>“He tells me lots of stories”</p> <p>“I go to the library”</p>
<b>Diversity</b>	A blend of two cultures	Children talk about their family’s culture and its influence on aspects of family life	<p>“We eat rice ... I can’t remember what we eat, the name we say, the Australian way, it’s something you put milk in ... it’s rice but it’s more soft and cooked”</p>