

CELEBRATE PARENTING with PARENTS

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Introduction

The Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) are county level committees charged with planning, improving and co-ordinating services for children and young people. They bring statutory, community and voluntary providers together for joint planning and co-ordination of activities and development of services with the view to enhance interagency cooperation and service delivery to children young people and their families. CYPSC emphasises involving local communities in tackling the problems they face, and creating successful partnerships between voluntary and statutory agencies at community level.¹ The overall purpose is to improve outcomes for children and young people through local and national interagency working. A key strategy to achieve this aim is to consult with parents and young people so as to involve them in the process of developing plans that will better meet their needs. One of CYPSC Waterford's priorities is to *"improve information and referral pathways of services for children and families"*.² This project was designed to find out where parents get their information about parenting and parenting supports, so as to address their needs in the development of a parenting Plan for Waterford.

"To be a parent is to be part of a profound and unique human relationship, to engage in a particular kind of love, not to make a certain sort of thing."

Thank you to all the parents who participated in this consultation and to all the staff in parenting support organisations in Waterford. We appreciate your time, your good humour and the many important insights you took the time to share.

¹ CYPSC. (n.d.). Retrieved June 1, 2017, from <http://www.cypsc.ie/waterford/priorities.379.html>

² CYPSC. (n.d.). Retrieved June 1, 2017, from <http://cypcs.ie/>

The Information Gap

TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency was established in 2014 and is responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. They define 'parent' to include *“mothers, fathers, grandparents, stepmothers, stepfathers, carers and other adults with responsibility for caring for a child or young person including, for example, those with responsibilities for children in residential care”*.³

The recent census shows that the total number of families increased by 3.3%, to 1,218,370, over the five years to April 2016. The total number of children in families increased by 56,626 (3.5%) to 1,682,600 in 2016. The CSO conclude that the *“long-running decline in the number of children per family has levelled off. The average number of children in each family was 1.38, the same as in 2011. In 2006 it was 1.41”*. In Waterford the average is in the range 1.17-1.35, slightly lower than the national average. While husband, wife and children remained the most common family type, accounting for almost half of all families in Ireland, cohabiting couples with children increased by 15,318 and there were 1,426 families containing seven or more children.

The Childrens and Young Peoples Plan 2016-2018 states *“information provision of mainstream universal services is considered adequate and targeted services are viewed as less accessible both in terms of quick access and information about such services”*. (CPYSC, 2015, p. 40)

There are a number of challenges for service providers not least the need to keep up to date and in contact with the range of parenting and childrens services in their area. The Childrens and Young Peoples Plan 2016-2018, highlights that *“51.5% of services surveyed do not have a planned, formal relationship with other providers”*. (CPYSC, 2015, p. 26) The plan also highlights

³ CYPSC. (n.d.). Retrieved June 1, 2017, from <http://cypcs.ie/>

that while early intervention and prevention are seen by service providers as crucial, the service providers need resources to ensure that they have *'adequate knowledge and information to support children and families'*. (CPYSC, 2015, p. 35) The CYPSC, comprised of service providers in Waterford, seeks to assess information gaps in Waterford. This consultation was designed to involve local people in a process where they would explore their experiences to date of accessing parenting information, and gather ideas and suggestions to make improvements.

Parent Consultation Process

Waterford CYPSC is in the process of developing a Parenting Support Service Plan for the Waterford Area. Consultation with parents was identified by the CYPSC as key to the development of their Parenting Support Service Plan.

Parents views are essential to the development of an appropriate and responsive plan. This consultation project was designed to gather views and experiences of parents who had sought information and help with their parenting. Parents were asked about four key information issues:

- A. How they access information about parenting and parenting supports;
- B. What are the gaps, if any, in accessing information about parenting and parenting supports;
- C. What is the best method for getting information about parenting supports; and
- D. What other information sources about parenting supports services would help parents in the area?

The project involved parents in the catchment area of Waterford city and county.

We divided supports that parents need information about into three categories:

1. Parent and toddler groups – these focus on helping toddlers socialise, learn and play

together and also give parents an opportunity to meet and socialise;

2. Parenting courses – these are designed to support parents to discuss challenges, learn new ways to interact with their children, gain new skills, enhance current skills and gain support from interacting with other parents; and
3. One to one support – which is a more individually focused support for parents who would find group work challenging.

At our first project meeting with CYPSC Family Support Sub Group, we proposed the scope of the project. The timeline was agreed, information about the local parenting groups gathered and we discussed the most effective methods to reach parents locally to get their views. We identified a range of parent meetings taking place over the project period and members took on to spread the word about the consultation as widely as possible.

We established consultation protocols and identified most recent and relevant research and data from other parent consultations in the area.

Each of the members of the CYPSC Family Support Sub-Group took on to inform their service users about the consultation, and invite them to participate in the focus groups. It was also agreed that a survey to capture rural and urban parents would be a useful additional method of consultation. Subsequently an invitation notice was designed and circulated throughout parenting groups in Waterford.

The focus groups were designed to get parents to tell us about how they got information about parenting supports, where they got information about services in the local area and where they would seek information if they have questions about anything in relation to their children? We asked if they knew how other parents find out about parenting supports, and if they recommend ways of looking for information about services in the local area to other parents? The last set of questions related to additional parenting supports.

Key principals underlying our delivery were accommodating diversity and meaningful

engagement. We consciously designed the focus groups to accommodate difference, in terms of attention capacities, cultural perspectives and we worked to ensure that participants had an enjoyable and informative experience. We held five focus groups with forty-four parents in total:

1. Parent and toddler group – interested Parents WCCC Training Room in Kilmacthomas;
2. Sacred Heart Family Resource Centre Family Learning Group;
3. New Communities Group;
4. Roma Support Group; and
5. Traveller Community Development Education Group.

In order to create a positive atmosphere we began each session with an exercise asking what people liked about being a parent. In this way we sought to create a positive learning and sharing environment. Very often when people talk about parenting the focus is on the difficulties and challenges it brings, and often the conversations remains focused on problems, and seldom address the positives. We sought to ensure that the experience of the parents in the focus groups was one that reinforced positive parenting as a valuable contribution to society.

It became evident that a survey would be a useful way to gather information from more parents in the catchment area. Parents were assured that their responses were completely confidential and nobody would be individually identified. The survey was designed to be easy to complete. To improve the chances of a good response rate we circulated the survey by email to all local groups, encouraged groups to tell all their service users through their own email lists and provided a link to the survey on the CPYSC website.

The survey followed the Central Statistics Office (CSO) demographic questions relating to age, gender, number of children, ethnicity, level of education, contained questions about information sources and gaps in relation to all three service categories, parent and toddler groups, parenting courses and one-to-one parenting supports.

Views of Parents - Focus Groups and Survey

Parents were eager to learn about sources of information that would give them access to parenting supports. Some participants used the sessions to highlight that they have had very little opportunity to have their voice heard and were glad of the opportunity to exchange information and experiences.

The overwhelming view was that getting information about parenting supports is difficult.

In all of the focus groups parents stressed that they had to go through three or four organisations before they got to any relevant or useful information. Even then parents reported the information was not necessarily the most useful, in terms of their specific needs or the ages of their children. All groups identified the difficulty in sourcing and getting to good reliable, comprehensive information that was both easily accessed and relevant in terms of the age of their children. Put simply, getting the relevant information at the right time is the challenge for parents.

Information needs were wide ranging. Parents needed information about registering their child for school, about parent and toddler groups nearby, about where to go to get vaccination etc.

Parents were wary of the purpose of the focus groups and the common worry was that their parenting skills might be viewed as inadequate. As a general point it is important that all information presented to parents about parenting supports gives positive messages and encouragement about parenting.

Common to all the groups was the willingness to contribute and discuss experiences and views. Parents were delighted to be asked their opinion and given the opportunity to contribute ideas to improve the parenting experience for families in Waterford. Parents want to be consulted, and consultation should always support parents. Consultation is a valuable tool.

212 people responded to the survey in a two-week period. The predominant age group was the 36-45 year olds, with the 26-35 year olds being the second largest group. 90% of the respondents were female, 67% were married, 13.8% were living together, 4% were divorced, 3.5% were separated and 10.3% were single. With regard to number of children over 50% had 2 and at the other end of the scale 0.6% of respondents had 6 or more children.

92.5% of respondents were Irish, 0.6% Irish Traveller, 2.9% English, 2.3% Polish, 1.7% Latvian, 1.1% French. No-one described themselves as Irish-white, 1.1% as Irish-Black/African, 5.2% other white background and 1.1% Irish – other including mixed background. 4.6% have difficulty with pain and breathing, 91.4% do not have a disability. With regard to religion, 59.5% were Roman Catholic, 20.1% no religion and 5.2% Church of Ireland. A considerable number of respondents did not want to answer this question.

Chart One: Age of the Respondents

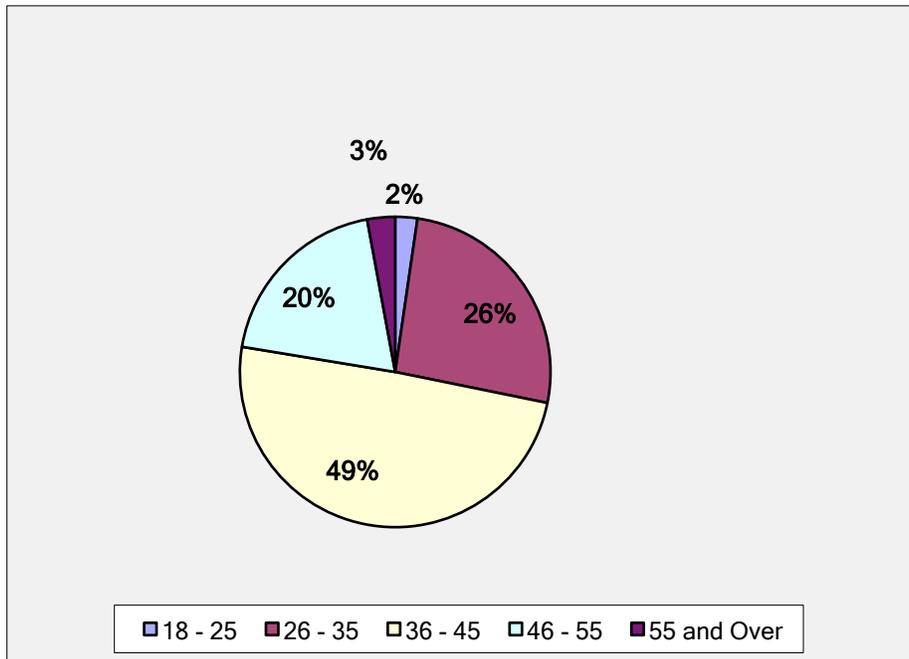


Chart Two: Number of Children

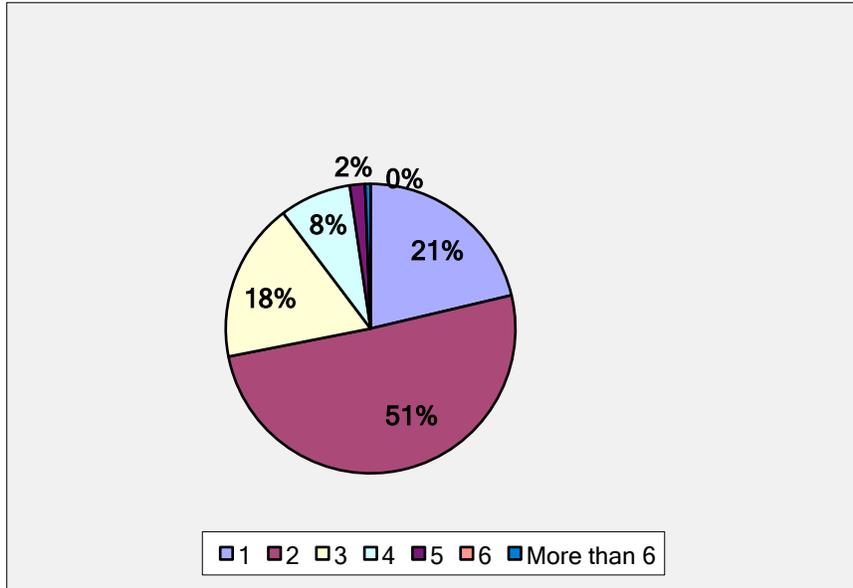


Chart Three: Geographical Location of Respondents

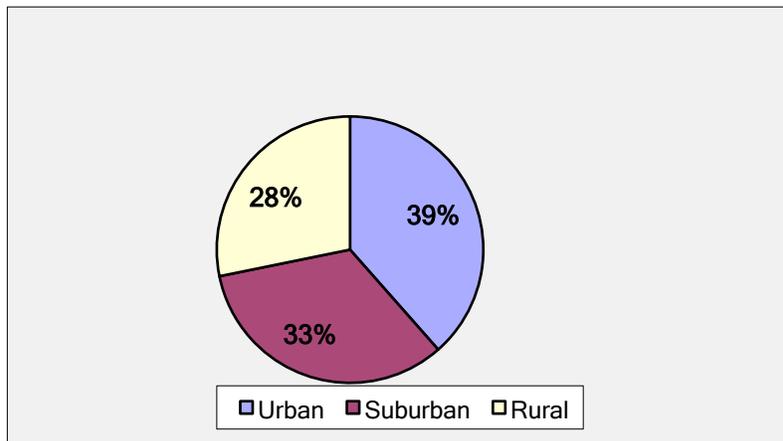
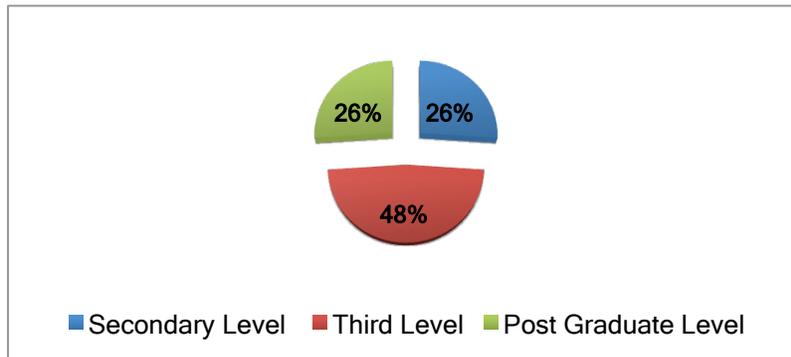


Chart Four: Level of Education of Respondents



When asked where do you look for information about parenting, respondents listed their top five sources. Family and friends are by far the most popular source of information. What is interesting is the absence of service providers, for example healthcare, education, local groups and citizen's information in the top five.

The popularity of the Internet, Facebook, parenting blogs and parenting apps is notable. When compared across the three categories of parenting supports, i.e. parent and toddler groups, parenting courses and one-to-one parenting supports, friends and Facebook are consistently the top two choices – or go to's – to get information. This has significant implications for the design of an effective communication strategy. The Internet is now an essential tool for effective provision of information to parents. However, while 81% of parents said a Waterford specific website would be useful, 48% said information sessions in Waterford and 21% wanted posters, so a variety of methods is required.

Chart Five: Top Five Used Sources of Parenting Information

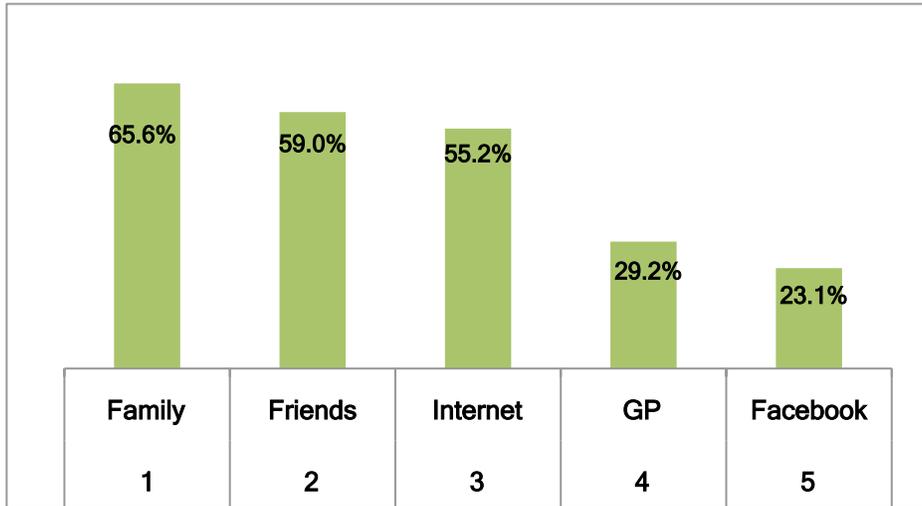


Chart Six: Least Used Sources of Parenting Information

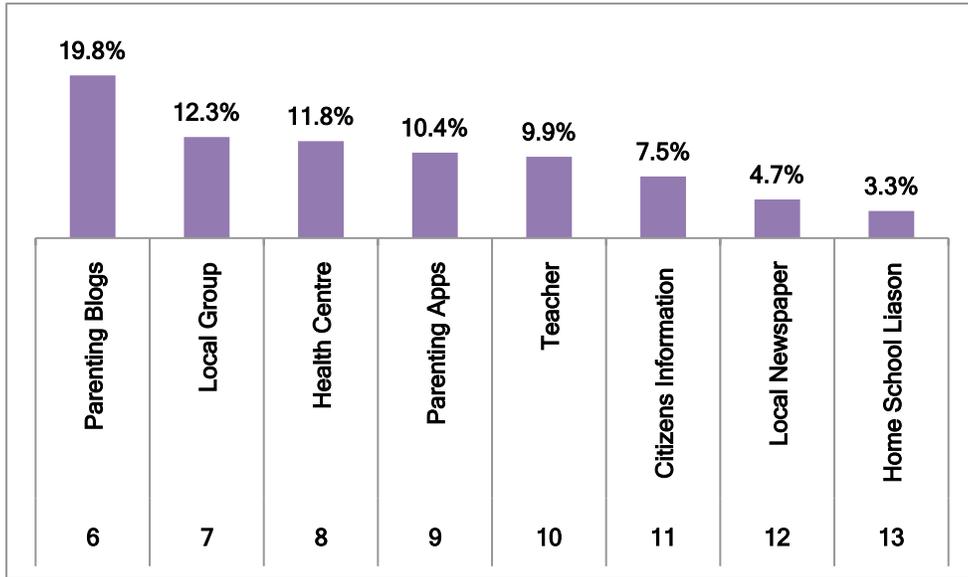
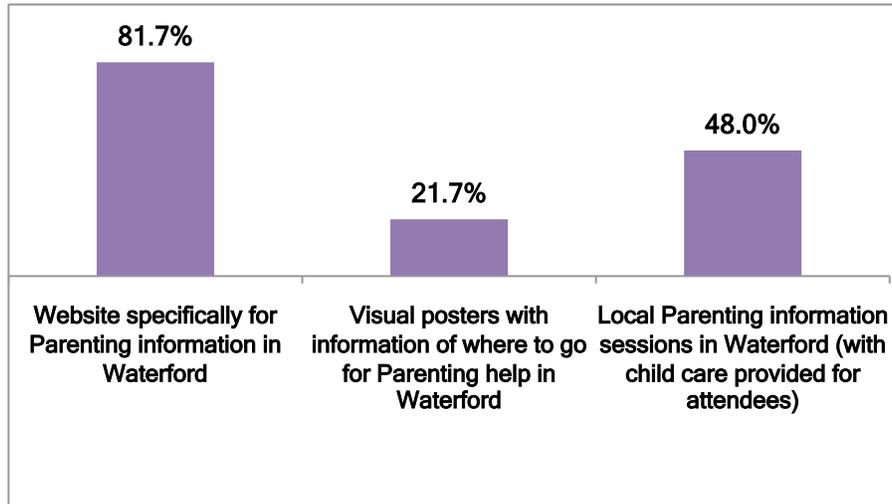
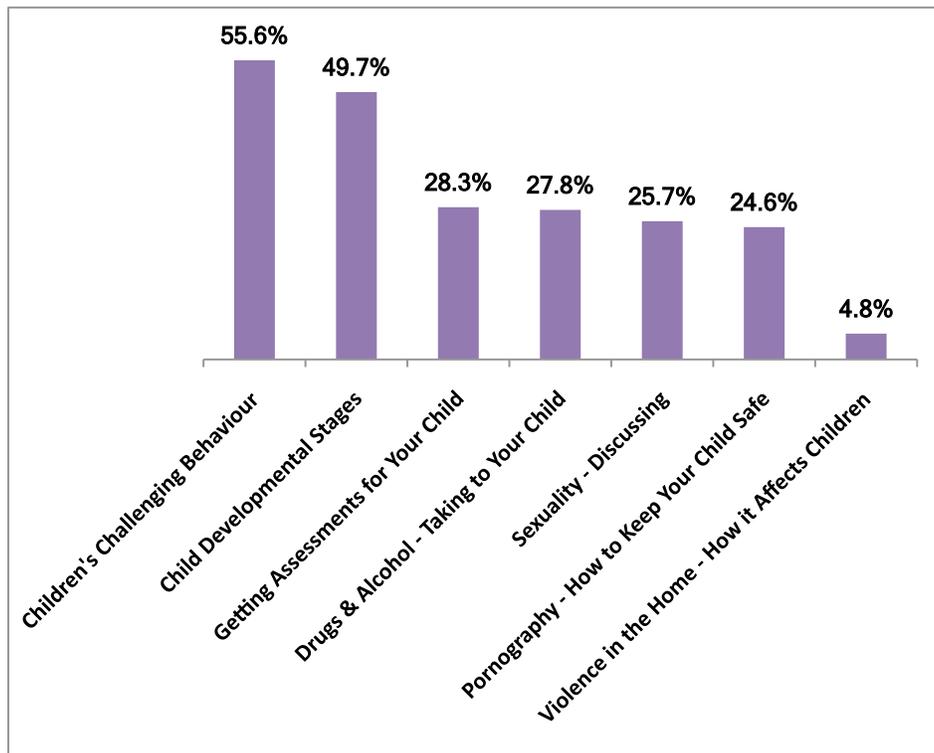


Chart Seven: Most Helpful Methods of Getting Parenting Information



In relation to what information parents want, the following chart illustrates the priorities for the respondents.

Chart Eight: Topics of Parenting Information Most Useful



Overall, parents said that their biggest challenge was being able to easily access reliable information related to the age of their child. They stressed that it is difficult to wade through the range of information sources, and find an answer to the question they have, at the time they need it. Information sources emphasize the nature of the services they provide, rather than facilitate parents getting the information they need, when they need it. They stated that a significant challenge was the sheer number and range of places they had to encounter before getting to the information they required. The general experience was that health services organisations only provide information on health issues, education organisations only provide information on education issues, and all rely on parents being able to ask the right question. The parents rarely experienced a holistic approach to information provision.

The general view is that accessing programmes, such as the Snuggles Stories Project, child development information sessions or breastfeeding groups, was of great benefit and encouraged people to access further supports. The power of people meeting to share their resources and experiences was very evident in the focus group discussions. Participants spoke of the value of the space for making connections and reducing the isolation parents can experience. It is clear that a range of organisations, including community-based supports, are providing a valuable service for parents. The view was that parenting support groups are over stretched and challenged to keep up-to-date with the range of services parents seek information about.

“Being part of a group with other parents, sharing the challenges and not feeling alone is one of the biggest benefits and support”

In addition, these spaces provided parents with the opportunity to learn about the value of play, and to experience positive interactive play with children. The possibility of mixing activities across the generations and

“I was lucky I had a neighbour who knew a lot about courses and groups I could go to”.

communities as a means of promoting positive relationships was also highlighted.

Participants in three of the five focus groups spoke about the need for information on rights and entitlements and help with interacting with the relevant authorities about rights and entitlements.

In four focus groups participants highlighted the fact that they had to go to a number of different places to get the information they needed. In one focus group, a parent told of her experience of being handed information leaflets, just as she was leaving the hospital having given birth, when she was quite stressed. She said she did not find this a useful approach.

When looking up information on the Internet, participants stated that they were not always sure that it was reliable or the best sources of information. Parents reported that more often than not they managed to glean information in conversations with neighbours, friends or other parents.

The Citizen Information Service was cited as useful, but by only one or two parents and the same is true of services such as Barnardos, Family Resource Centres and other services. While there are some good information sources for example, www.LoveParenting.ie and the ParentLine, neither were cited by the parents in any of the focus groups. These sites do not have information about services in the Waterford area.

Parents said they would not contact TUSLA directly for parenting information or support, as they had negative perceptions. They assumed that they would be judged negatively and their parenting skills would be called into question. Parents said that they would not seek contact with TUSLA unless directly supported by a project worker to do so, or as a last resort. There was general agreement in all groups that more people would access and could benefit from information and support, if they knew and felt that it was not perceived as bad parenting to do so.

“You wouldn’t want to be bringing trouble to your door”.

“Will I be challenged on my parenting - are they going to say I am a bad parent”.

The most common barrier to asking for support or information was the fear of being seen as an inadequate parent and more worryingly running the risk of having a child taken into care.

Some of the participants in the groups spoke about their experience of being criticised by some professionals making them reluctant to ask for information. Most people felt uncomfortable about approaching services directly due to fear of being judged. Other participants said they found long waiting times for services frustrating especially for medical appointments and parenting courses.

In all focus groups the parents stressed that their involvement in parenting groups was extremely beneficial and they would recommend these courses and supports to other parents. So there is clearly a need for improved messages about what will happen if you seek support as a parent, and a good communication strategy that encourages parents to interact around their parenting in a positive way.

Recommendations

It is with thanks to all the parents who participated in this consultation that we have been able to provide a number of recommendations that we believe will greatly improve the current situation for parents in Waterford.

ONE: Consult Parents Regularly Regarding Parent Supports

Two heads are better than one - the power of consultation. Parents actively engage in exchanging information, experiences and stories when they get the opportunity to get together. Parents themselves, although often now aware, or made to feel so, are a vital resource. We recommend that CYPSC consult with parents on a regular basis, covering

Waterford city and county, and addressing questions of access to information and service provision, with positive parenting messages as an overarching theme.

There is an opportunity, given the range of sources identified by parents in this consultation to employ a wide variety of methods to inform and consult. Developing a Parenting in Waterford Facebook page and conducting focus groups for family members of all generations are two immediate suggestions for action. Promoting active communication across the generations will create more synergies and generate more information about what is working and what is needed.

TWO: Value Creativity when Consulting with Parents

People communicate more freely and clearly when they are enjoying the experience and even having fun. In this consultation, we used a collage, with pictures showing all different types of people in all types of parenting situations. We asked the group to say what they liked about being a parent, acknowledging the different parenting styles and stresses. This created a lot of discussion with laughter that helped to generate a focus on positive parenting. We recommend that the CYPSC use a variety of methods to help parents to share their perspectives and encourage them to think outside the box in all future consultations.

THREE: Promote Diversity and Inclusion in Consultations

We specifically addressed diversity because we believe in the richness generated by reflecting the diversity that exists in society. A number of models such as FWC, Restorative practise and Meitheal work on this basis also.

“If you feel comfortable going to a place you’re more likely to ask for help or say what’s going on for you”.

Actively involving the diverse communities in Waterford in the development and implementation of new plans and these recommendations will help to deliver more successful outcomes and even greater participation.

FOUR: Build the Case for More Early Childhood Care and Education Supports

In all focus groups parents highlighted the necessity and value of early childhood care and education supports. Many shared the experience of not being able to take up courses, access supports or take up work because of lack of and cost of early childhood care and education services. The lack of early childhood care and education supports, and indeed the lack of awareness that some supports are provided presents a significant barrier to parents. It is essential that the provision of childhood care and education supports are part of the positive message about parenting supports in the area, and that the CYPSC lobbies for more of these services in the county.

FIVE: Develop a Single Source of Parenting Information

Parents want up to date, relevant and local information on all aspects of parenting. Having a single source of information would enable better co-ordination of information about parenting supports, and the promotion of positive messages for all involved in parenting roles. It could also be gradually developed to include information on every service related to children so a parent could access everything from registering a child to accessing medical, legal and social supports/information all in the one location. This would require a project plan and resources.

SIX: Develop and Run a “Celebrating Parenting” Campaign in Waterford

Parents want to know where to go when they need information, hear good messages, learn and feel valued as parents. This cannot be achieved if the fear of criticism prevents them from seeking information. Some of the participants suggested positive messages, such as the following, as a good basis for engagement:

- *I want to know more about how I can enjoy my relationship with my child so that we can both grow, be confident and happy.*
- *No one can know all the answers. Different perspectives and knowledge create more options and greater understanding.*
- *Society benefits from a diverse approach to parenting providing the health and wellbeing of the child is a priority.*

- *The more you know the more options you have. Lets create the environment for healthy growth.*

We recommend that CYPSC bring local government, business, voluntary, statutory and community organisations together to create a festival of events and activities for all communities that promotes positive messages about parenting in Waterford. Models in other sectors can provide valuable insights in to what can work. In the agri-food sector for example the Grow it Yourself (GIY) model has applied several successful strategies to engage people in a positive campaign to promote good food, that have engaged large numbers of people across the community.

Every one has a relationship with food the same is true for parenting. Parenting has come through a variety of changes in focus and thinking over the years, and it's time to make the positives stronger, more visible and celebrated.

SEVEN: Provide Feedback on the Outcomes of Consultations and Campaigns

When people feel their input is valued and see the results of their efforts they tend to be more likely to engage on an ongoing basis in the development of facilities and services. It is a good principle to ensure that families see their input recognised, valued and acted upon. We recommend that CYPSC communicate the results of this consultation as widely as possible and acknowledge those that were involved. The CYPSC newsletter, member newsletters etc, school notice boards, community radio, free papers etc are all cost efficient and effective ways of spreading the word.

Conclusion

In the course of this consultation a general consensus emerged. Information is difficult to find and there is a negative perception of asking for help with parenting. However parents want to be involved, consulted and valued. There is an opportunity now to publically do that and celebrate parents in Waterford, while at the same time consult them regarding their needs, on a regular basis.