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Early childhood centres as  
places for family resilience  
and social capital

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the Treasury series on social mobility

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## **Argument today:**

Early Childhood Centres are key places for supporting family resilience and social capital

- Universal provisions
- Non-targetted - no stigmas or threats
- They are available near to homes and families
- Historically they have been in local communities - and have been a point of transition to school
- Majority of families have some contact with an ECE service (compared with health or social services)

- They are 'affordable' - childcare subsidies, kindergarten donations, 20 hours free
- They are inclusive of ALL ( particularly community based settings)
- They are an anchor within communities
- They are often the beginnings of parental education and workforce participation

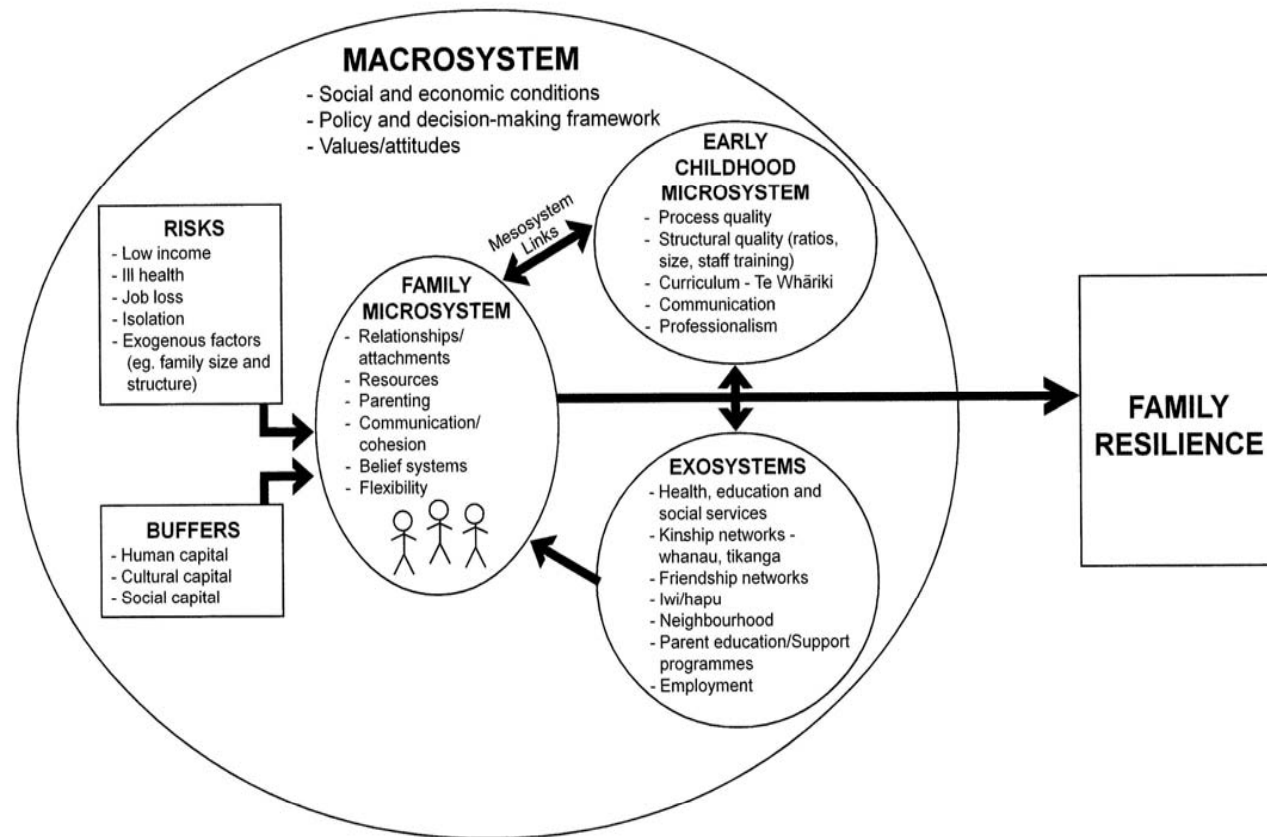
# Family resilience and social capital

## Findings from four different projects

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- *MSD funded study*: ECE centres and Family Resilience
- *TLRI funded study*: Two year-olds at kindergarten- children's experiences and teachers' practices
- *MOE funded Centre of Innovation*: What counts as support for families?
- *OU funded study*: New Zealand kindergartens - current contexts

# Ecological Model of Family Resilience



# Family Resilience and ECE centres - MSD

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- Three EC centres (two kindergartens and one childcare centre), which were selected as examples of high-quality EC programmes and which were reported to demonstrate a strong family support component
- Dunedin, Wellington and Gisborne

## ■ The participants included:

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- 29 families – ten from Dunedin, eleven from Wellington and eight from Gisborne
- 12 EC staff – six in one centre, and three in each of the two others
- 13 representatives of advisory support and social agencies who had been nominated by staff of the EC centres as providing vital support for their centre and families – six from Dunedin, four from Wellington and three from Gisborne.

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- Interviews with all participants (parents, teachers, identified key agency reps)
  - Participant observations in centres
  - Analysis of documentation re. parent involvement and support
  - Staff reflective journals and observations

Full report available: [www.msd.govt.nz](http://www.msd.govt.nz)

# Under three-year olds in Kindergarten (2 year project)

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- Aim was to gather the experiences of two year-olds in kindergartens (four kindergarten case studies, 18 2-year olds)
- Observations of children, teacher reflections on pedagogical practices and children
- **Parent Interviews**

Full report available: [www.tlri.org.nz](http://www.tlri.org.nz)

# Citizens Centre of Innovation - 3 year project

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- What counts as support for families from a childcare centre that actively works with parents and children?
- Teacher action research - Nursery (full-time 0-2 year olds)
- Parent interviews
- Social worker pedagogical reflections

Full report available:<http://www.educationcounts.govt>

# Kindergartens - Current contexts (2006-2008)

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- 12 Kindergarten Associations - Case Study: CEO/General Manager, PSM/Senior Teachers, Teachers, Parents
- Phone interviews: CEO/General Manager, PSM/Senior Teachers

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- 31 General Managers/ Chief Executives + 3 Operational Managers/General Administration Managers
  - 60 Senior Teachers/Professional Services Managers
  - 71 teachers from 12 associations (Urban: 34, Rural 37)
  - 61 parents from 12 associations (Urban: 34 Rural: 27)

Work in progress

# ECE as a site of family support for resilience and social capital

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# ECE attendance

TYPE OF SERVICE	YEAR											
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	% Change 1990 - 2007	% Change 2003 - 2007	
<b><i>Licensed ECE services:</i></b>												
Kindergarten	45,993	45,869	45,439	45,169	45,109	45,287	44,920	44,435	43,695	-0.2%	-3.1%	
Playcentre	16,261	15,808	14,786	14,879	15,200	15,440	15,059	14,888	14,664	-35.3%	-3.5%	
Education and care centres <sup>1</sup>	68,132	71,231	73,192	76,246	78,967	81,096	83,889	86,059	91,733	195.6%	16.2%	
Te kōhanga reo	11,859	11,138	9,594	10,389	10,319	10,418	10,070	9,493	9,236	-8.6%	-10.5%	
Homebased networks	8,498	8,937	8,546	8,591	9,587	9,922	9,770	9,802	11,073	587.3%	15.5%	
Correspondence School <sup>3</sup>	1,097	984	947	913	991	922	813	577	737	-14.4%	-25.6%	
Casual-education and care	É	É	É	É	É	É	É	É	É	N/A	N/A	
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>151,840</b>	<b>153,967</b>	<b>152,504</b>	<b>156,187</b>	<b>160,173</b>	<b>163,085</b>	<b>164,521</b>	<b>165,254</b>	<b>171,138</b>	<b>55.5%</b>	<b>6.8%</b>	
<b><i>Licence-exempt groups:</i></b> <sup>6</sup>												
Playgroups <sup>4</sup>	16,629	16,949	15,457	15,002	16,250	17,744	18,042	17,476	18,058	224.5%	11.1%	
Ngāpuna kōhungahunga <sup>4</sup>	..	..	209	351	408	571	519	289	343	N/A	-15.9%	
Pacific EC Groups <sup>4</sup>	2,948	2,576	2,545	2,914	2,573	2,392	1,864	1,179	964	-64.7%	-62.5%	
Playcentres <sup>45</sup>	388	372	404	371	466	530	436	167	335	N/A	-28.1%	
Te kōhanga reo <sup>2</sup>	524	381	214	138	130	191	146	89	69	N/A	-46.9%	
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>20,489</b>	<b>20,278</b>	<b>18,829</b>	<b>18,776</b>	<b>19,827</b>	<b>21,428</b>	<b>21,007</b>	<b>19,200</b>	<b>19,769</b>	<b>138.4%</b>	<b>-0.3%</b>	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>172,329</b>	<b>174,245</b>	<b>171,333</b>	<b>174,963</b>	<b>180,000</b>	<b>184,513</b>	<b>185,528</b>	<b>184,454</b>	<b>190,907</b>	<b>61.3%</b>	<b>6.1%</b>	

# Formal versus Informal Support

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## How successful are 'formal education arrangements' for parents using ECE centres?

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- All three centres in the 'resiliency project' had formal educational programmes and workshops for parents and families
- They offered them regularly but were usually 'preaching to the converted'

# Why don't they work?

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Families are often preoccupied with survival - putting food on the table

*Families - they're often overloaded. Like they are stressed out and like sometimes talking about early childhood, then how they should encourage their children to do this and this, to them is not important. They are actually worried about the food on the table and how they are going to pay their rent and things like that. Really there is lots of things that we can offer but you've got to remember the load on families.  
(Support Provider #4)*

Exhaustion - from multiple employment, shift work, multiple children, managing home lives.

*A lot of people are at work and if they're on two low incomes, there's two jobs in the family or part time jobs, their main interest is to find out [pause] is to get the money to pay for the food. They're not interested in any of these other things. (Support Provider #6)*



Community consultation and providing requested evenings still not successful

# Working Alternatives

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Building relationships  
with the wider family  
and whanau

*They are very welcoming. Like when you walk in the gate and you walk in the door they greet every child by name and that child is made to feel quite special. And my kid, she gets quite embarrassed, but she loves it, absolutely loves it. The fact that someone would single her out and say 'Hello [child's name] you know, that makes her feel quite good, and makes us feel good. Like it makes you feel part of the [centre] really. (Parent #11)*

*Being committed, you know, that [pause] and having the same basic philosophy probably about you know, that families are, you know, they are important and our job isn't just about being with kids. It's about being with families. (Teacher #10)*

## Taking a genuine interest in the lives of family members : the ordinariness of lives.

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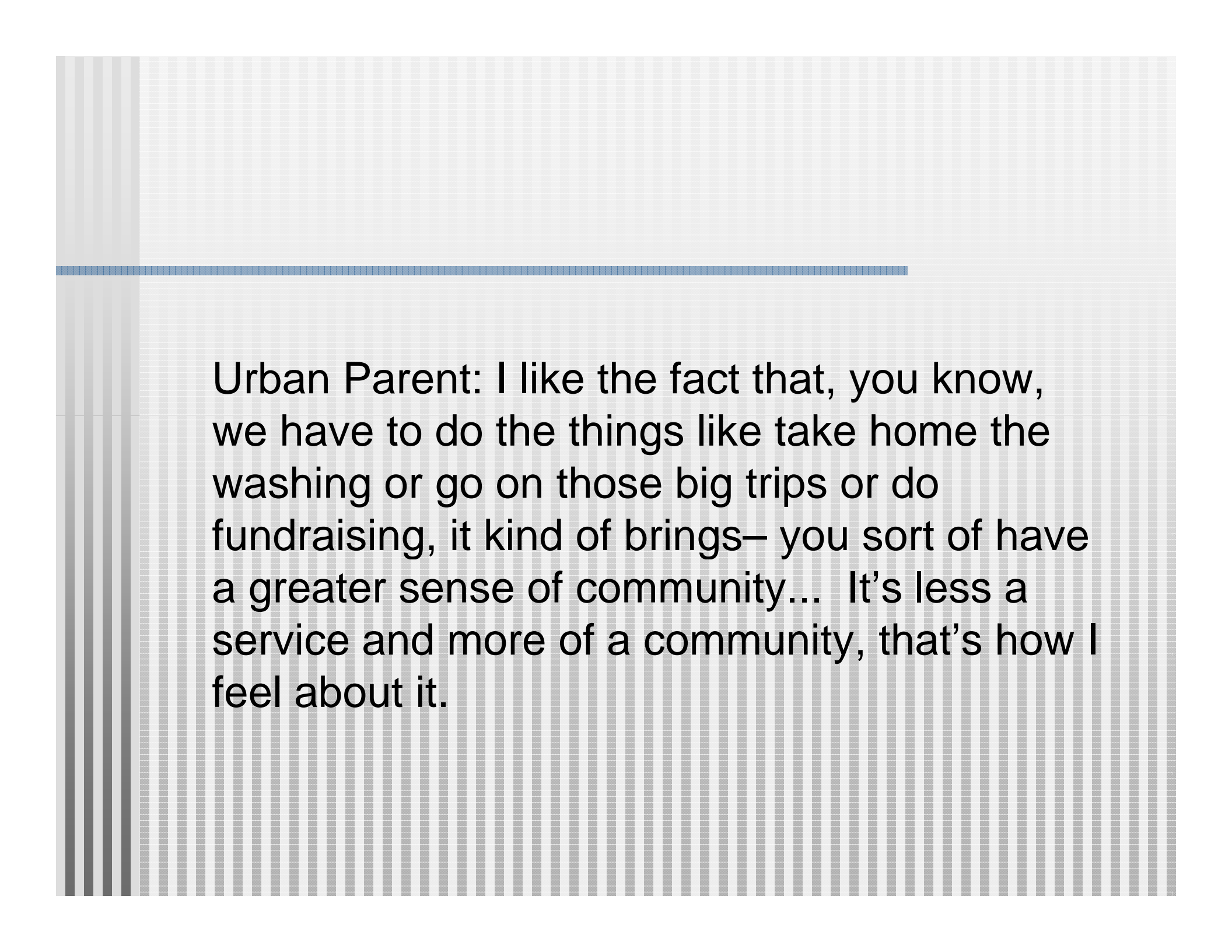
Talking to them. Talking about day-to-day things ... you've got to build up a relationship with them, don't you? And building up a relationship is by talking to them and talking about day-to-day things. (Teacher #5)

***You[ve] got to be able to approach them and feel comfortable [with] them. And then I feel that if you are comfortable approaching parents then they'll be comfortable approaching you back. But I mean they are very important when it comes to their children's learning too because they have got a lot of information that we don't have here. So it's important to have that relationship and the communication. (Teacher #3)***

# Involvement in the centre

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*Urban Parent:* It's all about that how community-based it is but also that opportunity to – even though it can be a – it's just that need for contribution, you know, physical – you know like whether it's grounds and I think it's kind of good for the kids to see you having that kind of input ...and you know you're welcome ...

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Urban Parent: I like the fact that, you know, we have to do the things like take home the washing or go on those big trips or do fundraising, it kind of brings— you sort of have a greater sense of community... It's less a service and more of a community, that's how I feel about it.

Provision of opportunities and spaces for parents to access and maintain social relationships with other families.

- Four main opportunities:
  - ☺ Dropping off and picking up time
  - ☺ Participation in the programme
  - ☺ Attending social events
  - ☺ Becoming a committee member



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Those who reported spending considerable amounts of time acknowledged the part this played in making contacts and friendships - that went beyond the immediate setting

Walking to and from the centre was also seen as a venue for forming relationships.

*You start out just chatting and walking together ... and go to their houses, and they come to my house, and it's the children that know each other. It's something that I always thought was important. That you attend the facilities in your neighbourhood. (Parent #18)*

*It's kind of like team building, you know like you become a team, a culture in itself. Yeah, and you feel like you are part of that team and you all get together. I mean no-one really wants to come along to watch the kids ride their bikes round the cones, but the kids love it and you go along. Like, it's the same with the garage sale, you know, you end up, it's like a camaraderie forms. Quite often, unfortunately it's only a small group, you know you are not talking about 60 parents because you know that never happens but you know it spreads the net. I mean it's essential really, because you sort of, you come in here as an individual, you know and you leave as an individual. Whereas in situations like that you see that you are actually part of a team and it's sort of a bigger group of people and you are all working towards the same aim. You know educating your child, and hopefully your kid has a very nice time while they are here you know. Those things are really important I think. (Parent #11)*

# Community Connectedness

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For children and for  
families

**Urban Parent:** We didn't know – we came here - my brother-in-law was in [location] which is why we moved to [location] but I mean it's like we didn't even know anyone here really and – and we've met so many friendly people, like all our friends now are from the kindy so when the baby was born I was – it really hit home - because so many people came by and, you know, like dropped off, you know, a meal or whatever and and the baby was in hospital for a few days and just to support us during that time was – it was amazing...it was great.

**Urban Parent:** I think there's sense of community not just – just being part of a family, which I think's important, but the fact that you're networking, you might just walk home with another group of kids, you know, the same direction or you'll... you might meet up at the park and the kids – kids just feel like they – they know other people. And I mean my childcare, because I don't have family here, are usually my kindy friends, you know, like ....

# Informal Support a Key!

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- Less pressure on parents
- More respectful of their rights and choices
- Demonstrates genuine interest in the families
- Validates the parent/s

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So it is not just like frivolous conversation - she is actually really taking in what is happening in my life ... It tells me that we matter to the centre and they understand people's feelings. They don't see parents walking in the door as just business. They see us as humans. Yeah, real people with real issues and problems coming through the doors. Not so much problems but good stuff as well and things to offer and skills. They are always interested in what I am doing and who I am doing it with. Yeah, so makes you feel good because it makes you feel like you matter and you're not just a business to them. (Parent #8)

# RELATIONSHIPS - ATTITUDES

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- Providing links for other relationships and friendships
- The culture of the centre influenced whether parents made contacts and friendships

# Involvement rather than Finance

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*Urban Parent.* I really like the more structured aspect of kindergarten [compared to other centre], the emphasis on learning and also the fact that it's not kind of – it involves the parents a lot more and there's not so much money, you know, people don't just pay, you know, two hundred dollars a month and then leave their kids and sort of – at kindergarten. I like the fact that, you know, we have to do the things like take home the washing or go on those big trips or do fundraising, it kind of brings– you sort of have a greater sense of community, I think, with kindergarten than you do with – with pay-for childcare kind of places. It's less a service and more of a community, that's how I feel about it.

# Involvement also matched to price

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**Urban Parent:** And I know my attitude to kindy as a parent was different to – to crèche because I – the crèche I felt: well I'm paying good money, so you do it all, whereas with the kindy it's sort of like...you feel like you should be part of it and helping and ...it's actually a really nice feeling, you feel involved.

# Relationship Building and Community Involvement

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**For children and for  
families**





**Urban Parent:** I think there's sense of community not just – just being part of a family, which I think's important, but the fact that you're networking, you might just walk home with another group of kids, you know, the same direction or you'll... you might meet up at the park and the kids – kids just feel like they – they know other people. And I mean my childcare, because I don't have family here, are usually my kindy friends, you know, like ... whereas I didn't even know any of the parents at the childcare centre.

*Urban Parent.* We've used both private [education and care centre] and kindergarten, And the – the friendships the kids have made in kindy have just been huge and my – my son, he's the oldest, is eight and a half and his kindy friends are still the first he invites round to play even though they're not at the same school.... The big difference I noticed between kindy and childcare centre was you never got to meet the parents of people at the childcare centre, you drop them off at whatever time you're on – on your way to work, or whatever, it's usually, you know, you've got five seconds to drop and run and if it doesn't fit in with the same schedule as other people you never meet the parents, you never feel part of a – a group, whereas the friendships, you know, we make as a family have been really, really good at kindy, so yeah.

# It's the little things that count

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Citizens Preschool and Nursery, Dunedin, Centre of Innovation, 2005-2007

-  Preparing a bottle for the trip home in the car
-  Slide shows of child at end of day
-  Written notes sent home recording key events for the day
-  Wearing name labels and advantage notice of new staff/relievers/students on a sign outside

# Parents' perspectives on accessing and utilising resources from community and government agencies

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# Help

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- Financial support - State - “cornerstone of financial support”
- Helping hand in health crisis - the difference between keeping the family going
- Free visits to the GP
- Plunket/Karitane Centres
- Help Line

# Hinders

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- Long waiting lists and over-burdened support services and agencies
- Inflexibility - unable to take into account individual differences and unique circumstances of families
- High turnover of staff at agencies
- Navigating the different systems
- Lack of visibility of services

There's often the resources available and people don't literally know how to navigate the systems. I think that's still an area that needs to be attended to. Like it's quite complicated navigating Inland Revenue for your family tax credits and stuff. And then you've got to navigate Work & Income for things. That's actually quite complicated. I remember navigating it myself once in the past, for a while in the past. I found it quite difficult to understand so I'm just imagining people coming from [different] countries! (Support Provider #7)

# Negotiating and Facilitating Family Contacts with Agencies

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I also believe that we're in the perfect position to be the referral agents too. You know for their health and their mental well-being and a whole lot of aspects of their lives. Where else would they get the information? You know, if they lived in a community, service building was on their corner, they'd probably go down there for their information. But they don't you know. By and large we're set up so we can be that place ... Someone's got to be available to access that information and refer them on and make sure their needs are met ... It doesn't mean having the answer but it means finding someone else who has. (Teacher #10)

# Relationships

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- Development of a close working relationship between the ECE centre and agencies
- Only refer when fully informed, key contact, and familiar with approaches and methods

# ECE as the Key: Teachers' first

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If I had to go to someone I would rather go to someone I did know. I would go to the teachers first off. Even once the children have finished there, if I knew that the teachers could help them somehow I wouldn't hesitate. And I know they would be willing to put me on to the right people and they wouldn't put me wrong. I trust them.  
(Parent #19)

# Family Whanau Worker - Citizens Centre of Innovation

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- Relationships through meeting, and engaging in conversations (coming and going)
- Involved in the the transition times
- Works as part of the team to make joint decisions and work on agreed goals with families, and teachers
- Established relationships with agencies to act as the bridge for the families when needed

# Conclusion

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- Families felt comfortable approaching the early childhood centre and staff
- The most successful support for families were offered in informal ways, rather than in planned, structured evenings or programmes
- The early childhood centres were able to reach out to families from an accessible, non-stigmatised setting unlike other settings that may focus on family deficits

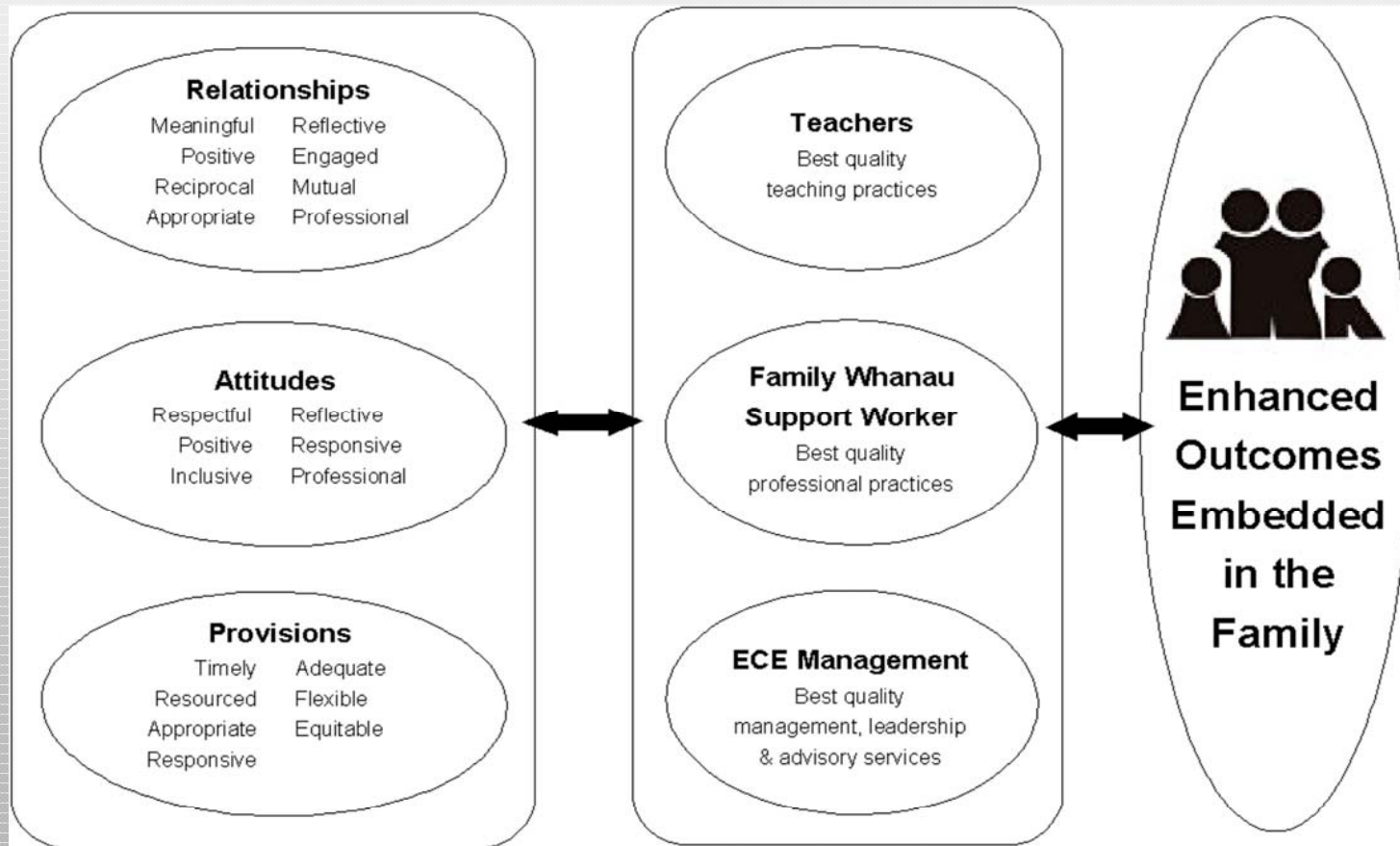
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- The early childhood centre support was universal and not targeted at a risk group – it was offered to all families, so those who needed it most could avoid feeling targeted and stigmatised
  - Early childhood centre support goals were about supporting children and supporting families from a strengths based model rather than from a deficit or abuse prevention model

# Conclusion

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- **Bonding**
- **Bridging**
- **Linking**
- **Relationships**
- **Attitudes**
- **Provisions**

# The EC R.A.P.



# Support for the Centres to be able to support families

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- Quality (Funded and appropriately resourced)
- Appropriate ratios and group sizes
- Trained staff (from birth onwards)
- Provided Professional development - appropriate and relevant
- Stable funding of centres to allow predictability and sustainable programmes