Deconstructing the barriers to engaging families with complex needs in early intervention services

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Play2Grow is an interagency supported playgroup run by the Clare Healthy Families (HF) Team and the Clare Medical Centre (CMC) in rural South Australia. The Play2Grow playgroup is based on a transdisciplinary model of care where boundaries between disciplines are deliberately blurred to enable a flexibility that promotes broad positive outcomes for children and their families. Transdisciplinary practice is especially relevant in a rural context where staffing issues necessitate a sharing of responsibilities for the fluid provision of client services.

Early intervention (EI) clinicians need to consider a multitude of factors that may prevent families from engaging in EI services. Factors may include parent mental health, access to transport, financial or employment stress, housing and social isolation. For some families the barriers to accessing ‘traditional’ EI services have meant that those with complex needs have not received adequate intervention or have disengaged from services prematurely. Play2Grow targets this population with its primary purpose being engagement with EI service.

Two sessions of Play2Grow are run weekly, for two hours each, at the EI space, which is co-located with the Clare Valley Children’s Centre. Each semi-structured playgroup is facilitated by allied health clinicians from the HF team and a mental health nurse from CMC. Throughout each session, social and play skills are modelled by clinicians and gentle coaching of parents is provided as appropriate. Clinicians provide a warm, empathetic, supportive and safe environment that harnesses the key elements of mindfulness practice: interest, curiosity and reflection without judgment. All clinicians involved in facilitating the group engage in their own reflective practice and have a deep understanding of the benefit of responding to the evolving needs of a group. Building relationships is considered an integral component of continued engagement with service. This is supported by providing continuity of access to a designated team of EI clinicians as well as a key contact person.

Play2Grow has evolved over the last two years and is now accepted as core business for the HF Team. Positive outcomes for families with complex presentation have been beyond expectation. Children with poor developmental projection have reached age-appropriate milestones; allied health intervention has been initiated for children of parents with mental illness where unintentional neglect has delayed development; Families SA and Uniting Care Wesley have withdrawn services as parents grow in confidence; child care and other community supports have been accessed by families and, most recently, the collaborative construction of a ‘mini racetrack’ in the playground was supported by all playgroup families. The outcomes are multifaceted and exciting and as a team of EI clinicians we look forward to celebrating with families as they ‘Play2Grow’. 