# Partnerships in Early Childhood Program: Final Report on Data Collection Round 1: Process Evaluation

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEW SOUTH WALES

# PARTNERSHIPS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

## FINAL REPORT ON DATA COLLECTION ROUND 1: PROCESS EVALUATION

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A report prepared for the Benevolent Society. The views expressed in this publication do not represent any official position on the part of the Social Policy Research Centre, but the views of the individual authors

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# Acknowledgements

# Executive Summary

Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC) aims to build on the existing strengths, skills and resources of major child care providers to promote strong, healthy relationships between children, children's services staff, families and communities. The Benevolent Society works in partnership with Wyong Shire Council, Campbelltown City Council, KU Children's Services and Lady Gowrie Child Centre to deliver the PIEC program in 14 long day centres and preschools (referred to hereafter as centre-based children's services). The PIEC program is funded under the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS), Invest to Grow program. The PIEC program operates in communities on the Central Coast, and in Sydney's south eastern and south western suburbs.

The Social Policy Research Centre was contracted to evaluate the PIEC program. This report summarises the baseline data collected for the formative or process component of the evaluation. The process evaluation was conducted in six sites, two in each of the three areas and included interviews with key personnel from the partner organisations and the Benevolent Society, children's services staff and parents about the development and implementation process of the program.

Key findings from the interviews have been organized into key themes emerging from the data to address the research questions: context and background; operation of the PIEC program; introduction of the PIEC program; implementation and conditions for change.

*Context and Background*

- Differences in family demographics, emergent social and emotional difficulties of children and type of setting have all had an impact on the implementation of the program.

- In many cases trusted children's services workers are crucial to implementation through their role in introducing parents to PIEC workers and acting as an 'ambassador' for the program.

*Operation of the PIEC program*

- There is variation on the emphasis being placed on the different activities of the PIEC program between settings. All sites are doing (or planning) all the PIEC program activities.

- There are advantages and disadvantages to these variations in implementation. One advantage is that it uses the skills and expertise of individual centres and preschools and allows staff to determine and respond to these needs. One disadvantage is the risk that the theoretical framework of the intervention could get lost as its implementation varies from one area to the next.

- Another risk is that attachment relationships and changes to practices in centre-based children's services become the focus only in areas where other needs are not urgent.

- Despite variations in emphasis of the program all PIEC workers provide support, information, feedback and informal and formal training to children's services staff.

- In all cases children's services staff viewed the PIEC worker as a highly valued additional resource.

*Introduction of the PIEC program*

- Partner organisations were very enthusiastic about the principles of the PIEC program and about working in partnership with the Benevolent Society.

- Some concerns were raised about the lack of clarity in the role of the PIEC worker and uncertainty about policies and procedures.

- Interview participants reported that they have spent time in the last twelve months developing documentation around these issues and that they expect this will make a difference in smoothing the operations of the program in the future.

- There is a need to balance the capacity for the PIEC program to be a context-responsive approach, sensitive to the requirements of individual centre-based children's services, with guidelines and protocols that both PIEC workers and children's services staff know and support.

- There is a high administrative burden imposed on directors through their involvement in meetings and planning.

*Implementation*

- Commitment from the partner organisations and directors has been vital to the successful implementation of the program.

- Understanding of the theoretical and practical components of the program by directors and partners is also essential for successful implementation.

- It is important that the PIEC program is introduced gradually, while accommodating the particularities of individual sites, staff and relationships.

- A noticeable change in staff willingness to embrace the program occurred once training in attachment and circle of security was provided.

- All the parents who spoke to us were very supportive of the PIEC program and welcomed it as additional expertise and improvements to the quality of their children's experience of children's services.

*Conditions for change*

- There were a number of characteristics of *settings* that fostered openness to change and ready acceptance of what the PIEC program entails. These include:

  o a workplace environment of security and respect where staff felt their expertise and practice knowledge was respected during the introduction of the PIEC program;

  o time taken to build relationships between PIEC staff and children's services staff, parent and children;

- o gradual introduction of changes; and

- o support for staff at all levels in changing practice.

- There were also a number of characteristics of *PIEC workers* that appear to foster change and acceptance. This happened when the PIEC worker:

  - o adopted the practices that are usual to the centre or preschool; was familiar with early childhood settings and PIEC's theoretical basis;

  - o occasionally assisted with cleaning, caring and routine duties; worked as part of the team;

  - o was unobtrusive; and

  - o took time to get to know the staff and parents.

*Barriers and facilitators to change*

- Some resistance to changing practice happened when there was a disconnect between staff practice knowledge of 'what works' and the model of care proposed by the PIEC program.

- Change seemed to have been easiest in sites where there was a focus on the theory behind the PIEC program and the emphasis on relationships and children's needs.

- In a number of sites the easiest and most effective way to introduce the PIEC program was to emphasise the new language for existing practices and the development of what was already in place.

- Limited time available for PIEC workers to talk to staff, and for staff to step back and reflect on the information provided by PIEC workers, was a common issue raised in the interviews.

- Many families across the regions have difficulties and needs that are not readily addressed by any one intervention. It is important that the PIEC program connect parents to services and provide information and training to parents, but this type of intervention is known to be very difficult, time and resource intensive, and with difficult-to-measure effects.

- Establishing connections with families is difficult when PIEC staff are only in the centres or preschools part-time and parents are usually rushing to either drop off or pick up their children.

*Key changes*

- The length of time the PIEC program has been operating in the six sites involved in the process evaluation also varies which influences the degree to which changes have occurred.

- Considerable changes seem to have resulted from the implementation of PIEC, although it varies from site to site depending on the emphasis placed on the different components of the PIEC program.

- In most sites, from the perspective of both directors and staff, the introduction of the PIEC program has led to an increase in staff's reflective capacity and the language used in relation to children's social and emotional development.

- In some sites the introduction of playspaces has meant they have a greater capacity to observe the children and focus on their needs as they move in and out of activities.

- In the area where the PIEC program has focused more directly on linking families with the service system staff noted that they now were more aware of the range of services available to support families in the local area.

- Parents who attended the information and parenting sessions found them very informative and useful.

- Children's services staff reported that one of the main benefits of the PIEC program for children was having an extra person who had the capacity to just focus on their needs and interact with them without having to look after their physical needs or the surrounding environment.

The principles of the PIEC program are being incorporated into the sites, but participants emphasised that it will take time and support for this to happen. Overall the PIEC program was highly valued by the interview participants including partner organisations, children's services staff and families.

# 1  Introduction

The Partnerships in Early Childhood Program (PIEC) aims to build on the existing strengths, skills and resources of major child care providers to promote strong, healthy relationships between children, children's services staff, families and communities. The Benevolent Society works in partnership with Wyong Shire Council, Campbelltown City Council, KU Children's Services and Lady Gowrie Child Centre to deliver the PIEC program in 14 centre-based children's services. The PIEC program is funded under the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS), Invest to Grow program. The PIEC program operates in communities on the Central Coast, and in Sydney's south eastern and south western suburbs.

## 1.1  Overview of PIEC

The development of the PIEC model is based on research showing that high quality interventions focusing on the development of secure relationships between children's services staff and children are linked to improved outcomes for high risk children (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Yandell and Hewitt, 1995). Relationships and attachment in child care settings have been associated with quality of the child care setting, interaction with peers and social competence (Zenah, Stafford and Rice, 2005).

The theoretical framework of the PIEC program is described in detail in the *Partnerships in Early Childhood Program Draft Report on Data Collection, Round 1* (Thomson, valentine, Longden and Harrison, 2006).

PIEC offers a suite of activities that respond to the needs of the local community and the needs of the children, families and staff in each child care centre and preschool. Strategies include:

- placing a family worker or psychologist at the childcare centre or preschool, working with staff, children and families to identify and support high-need children and families;

- providing staff with hands-on training and supervision to increase their understanding of children's behaviours and relationship needs;

- a focus on the important daily transition moments for children, parents and staff (the children's arrival at and departure from the centre or preschool);

- supported playgroups and Parents Connects groups in the local community open to families from the centre or preschool and also to families living locally whose children are not enrolled at the centre or preschool;

- individual support and counselling for parents;

- parenting mornings, focusing on the needs and strengths of parents (PlayPower workshops for parents are incorporated into these activities); and

- links with other local services providers, connecting families to services and to other community supports.

## 1.2 Overview of PIEC Evaluation

The Social Policy Research Centre was contracted to evaluate the PIEC program. The overall aims of the evaluation include: to provide information that monitors, assists and supports the further development and refinement of the PIEC program (formative/process evaluation); and to assess effectiveness of the PIEC program by monitoring the achievement of positive outcomes for children and families (summative/impact evaluation).

The evaluation includes three components of data collection and analysis.

- The impact evaluation assesses whether the program has achieved positive outcomes for children, families, staff and key stakeholders in the Invest to Grow priority area of early learning and care and supporting families and parents.

- The formative or process component of the evaluation focuses on the development and implementation of the PIEC Program.

- Performance based monitoring using the Invest to Grow Performance Indicators devised by FACS and the progress monitoring template developed by the National Evaluators.

Detailed information about the evaluation can be found in the PIEC Evaluation Framework (Thomson, valentine and Longden, 2005).

## 1.3 Outline of the Report

This report summarises the baseline data collected as part of the formative or process component of the evaluation. The following section describes the overall approach to the process evaluation. The findings from the baseline data collected from key personnel from the partner organisations and the Benevolent Society, children's services staff and parents about the development and implementation process are outlined in Section 3 in terms of conditions for change, facilitators and obstacles to change and key changes for staff, families and children. The final section of the report examines sustainability of PIEC and the future development and summarises the overall findings from the evaluation.

## 2 Approach to the Process Evaluation

The formative or process component of the evaluation focuses on the development and implementation of the PIEC program. It aims to monitor the extent to which services are delivered in the form envisaged by the Benevolent Society. Where the results of the program are not those envisaged by the Benevolent Society, the evaluation design, based on the principles of action research, seeks to inform current and future developments of the PIEC program (Wadsworth, 1993).

### 2.1 Process Evaluation Questions

The overall aim of the process evaluation is to determine whether and how the PIEC program has improved outcomes for children. It will also determine the extent to which the model has contributed to improvements in these outcomes. The following questions are being investigated in the process evaluation:

- To what extent is the implementation of the PIEC program consistent with the Project Logic?

- What factors supported or impeded the implementation of the PIEC program internally and externally?

- Was the implementation of the model effective and efficient?

- What have been the key changes implemented in the PIEC program as a result of the implementation?

- What were the strengths and key challenges?

- Are the project delivery documentation, including project management guidelines, quality assurance systems and staff training programs proving to be adequate, appropriate and supporting effective project operations? If not, what action is planned to refine them?

### 2.2 Data Sources

This section describes the data collection methods and instruments used in the process evaluation component. A triangulated methodology is employed to explore the process of development and implementation and the experiences of stakeholders from a number of perspectives. This component of the evaluation consisted of interviews with key personnel, children's services staff interviews and parents/carers.

The process evaluation was conducted in six sites, two in each of the three areas. Table 2.1 summarises the data collection for this first round, which took place between August and December 2006. Child care/preschool and parent interviews were held in August and key personnel interviews in November and December. In person interviews were conducted with children's services staff and telephone interviews were conducted with key personnel from partner organisations. PIEC workers and parents were interviewed in person and via the telephone.

**Table 2.1 Interview Participants**

|  | All areas | Central Coast | East Sydney | South West Sydney | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Key Personnel (partner organisations, Benevolent Society, PIEC staff) | 11 |  |  |  | 11 |
| Directors |  | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 |
| Child Care/preschool Staff |  | 4 | 8 | 4 | 16 |
| Families |  | 3 | 5 | 2 | 10 |
| Total | 11 | 9 | 15 | 8 | 43 |

*Key personnel interviews*

A number of face-to-face interviews in each site involving key personnel from the Program including the representatives from the partner organisations involved in PIEC, PIEC's program staff and Directors were conducted to gain the management level perspective on the implementation process.

Topics discussed in the interviews included:

- Implementation process of the PIEC program

- Perceived impact of the PIEC program

- Barriers and difficulties

*Children's services staff*

Up to 5 interviews were conducted with children's services staff in each site to examine the differences between process goals and practice.

Topics discussed in the interviews included:

- Knowledge of aims and objectives of the PIEC program

- Changes in processes as a result of the PIEC program

- Barriers and difficulties

- Perceived impact of the PIEC program

*Family interviews*

A sample of parents/carers were interviewed about their experience with the PIEC program and perceived impact. The sample included parents who have participated in the different types of interventions within the program.

Topics discussed in the interviews included:

- Access to information/support via the PIEC program

- Parents/carers contact with the psychologist/family worker

- Relationships with children's services staff

- Perceived impact of the PIEC program on children's behaviour
- What has been of most help
- Connection to the community outside the centre or preschool

The following section of the report outlines the main findings from the interviews described above.

# 3 Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings from the interviews for the first round of data collection in the process evaluation. They have been organised into key themes emerging from the data to address the research questions: context and background; operation of the PIEC program; introduction of the PIEC program; implementation and conditions for change.

## 3.1 Context and Background

There is considerable variation in the demographic composition of neighbourhoods and of families using the centre-based children's services involved in the evaluation. The baseline data collected as part of the outcomes evaluation shows that although the majority of parents or caregivers in the sample were born in Australia around a third in South West Sydney were born overseas or spoke a language other than English at home. Eastern Sydney had the highest proportion of parents who had completed a university degree compared to the other areas. The majority of parents were employed either full-time or parent time on the Central Coast and in East Sydney compared to 4 out of every 10 in South West Sydney. Reflecting these statistics over a third of parents in South West Sydney relied on government pensions or benefits as their main source of income in contrast to 6 per cent in East Sydney (Thomson, valentine, Longden and Harrison, 2006).

These differences are also reflected in the reasons for using the centre-based children's services. Some parents work and use the centres for long day-care, others as a pre-school early learning environment, others may be using the service under the conditions of a care order or Department of Community Services case plan. The child care settings themselves are different: they have children of different age ranges attending, operate for different hours, and have different staff-child ratios. In addition, some centres have undergone a recent restructuring process involving increasing the number of children attending the centres, the abolition of non-teaching Director positions and some permanent teaching staff position's have become floating positions which cover trained staff absences for different centres in the region.

Children's services staff and directors reported considerable variation in the circumstances and resources of families who use the centres. In some areas several parents are under pressure due to stresses such as poverty and the involvement of child protection authorities in their families. In other areas these stresses are less common. Interview participants reported that in areas of high stress parents often find it difficult to build up a relationship of trust and rapport with workers and, when that happens, it is likely to be with a person rather than a position. Trusted children's services workers are therefore crucial to the implementation of the PIEC program in that they are introducing parents to PIEC workers and acting as an 'ambassador' for the program. Parents who have been subject to a great deal of scrutiny and surveillance may also feel resistant to advice and perceived interference from others, including PIEC workers.

## 3.2 The Operation of the PIEC Program

The PIEC program consists of a number of activities. The interviews revealed that there is variation on the emphasis being placed on the different activities of the PIEC program between settings. However, all sites are doing (or planning) all the PIEC

program activities. Some sites have more of a focus on playspaces and the Circle of Security and the transitions when children are dropped off or picked up. One staff member working in a site where playspaces have been successfully implemented stated:

> The playspaces have worked really well…children know where we are and they just turn and look at you because they know that you're there….they feel really comfortable ..that somebody's taking care of them and they know where to go when they need somebody (child care/preschool staff).

In contrast other sites have focused their activities more on networking with local services and linking families with these services and groups through direct referrals and in some cases playgroups. One director commented:

> the worker's been able to help us in talking to those families on a more informal basis, encouraging them to go along, sometimes taking the initiative and saying would you like me to ring them [services]…. That's a huge thing for these families because they're intimidated by doctors and referral agencies, they find that quite threatening. (director).

The differences in emphasis are likely to have an impact on the delivery of the PIEC program, although it is not yet possible to predict what that impact will be. Our findings from interviews, however, indicate that differences in the composition and circumstances of settings, and the families who use them, are reflected in the way that the PIEC program is being implemented. For example, one manager reported that the PIEC worker has been active in setting up speech and occupational therapy sessions within site. This has been done to ensure that children who have been diagnosed as needing therapy get at least some contact with therapists, with a further aim of more intensive contact in some cases. In contrast, in another area a manager reported that most families in need of services like speech therapy have the resources to get them. In this area there is much less emphasis on linking families with services and much more on children's place in the Circle of Security.

There are some advantages in having the PIEC program vary across sites and areas. Most particularly, it uses the skills and expertise on the ground in different locations and allows the PIEC staff and centre-based children's services to determine what is needed and to respond to those needs. However, the risk of these variations is that the theoretical framework of the intervention is lost as its implementation varies from one area to the next. Another risk is that attachment relationships and changes to practices in sites become the focus only in areas where other needs are not urgent. The danger of this is indicating to centres, preschools or partners that attachment is less important for children in areas of high need, or that attachment relationships should be addressed only when every other need has been met. This is at odds with the theoretical framework of the PIEC program. This point is also discussed briefly in Section 3.6.

Despite the variations in the emphasis of the PIEC program activities, all PIEC workers provided support, information and training to staff, informally or through

formal training sessions on attachment theory and the Circle of Security. In all cases staff viewed the PIEC worker as a highly valued additional resource.

> if we had an issue with a child… we could …speak to her, an issue with a family, we could speak to her or just general ideas of what was happening with the children…a support worker and another staff member but in a different capacity. The difference would be….just an extra person not being in contact with regulations and everything, you're so conscious of that, just having that extra person you knew wasn't a number but you could use (child care/preschool staff)

PIEC workers provided support to staff by observing interactions between staff and children and parents and children and providing feedback in the form of alternative strategies or information and intervening when necessary.

> She's not only there watching, she really becomes a part of what's going on and she's been able to jump in when it's needed in any situation…sometimes we just look at her and we know that she's there and that's given us a lot of support…I've seen the parents approach her and she approaches parents when she sees the situation's, kind of, difficult especially separation and she tries to provide parents with techniques to separate (child care/preschool staff).

## 3.3   Introduction of the PIEC Program

*Partner organisations and Benevolent Society*

Partner organisations were very enthusiastic about the principles of the PIEC program and about working in partnership with the Benevolent Society. The key personnel from partner organisations reported that the PIEC program has not had an unsustainable increase in workload for them, but that there is a lot of work for managers at child care centre or preschool level.

The main concern from partner organisations was a lack of clarity in the role of the PIEC worker and uncertainty about policies and procedures. This was also reflected in interviews from other key personnel, who reported that the roles and responsibilities of partner organisations in preparing centres and supporting staff were not always clear. In some cases partner organisations had been active in this, in other cases their roles had been quite minimal. As the PIEC program is quite innovative in its format, in many cases existing policies were not really useful in setting out the responsibilities of the PIEC worker; their relationship with children's services staff and management; and how best to respond to complex (but not uncommon) scenarios. Interview participants, partner organisations, child care settings and the PIEC program reported that they have spent time in the last twelve months developing documentation around these issues and that they expect this will make a difference in smoothing the operations of the program in the future.

This lack of clarity has had an impact. The PIEC workers did not have people in the centres or preschools to model their practice on, nor extensive documentation or instructions. However, participants reported that polices and procedures for PIEC staff

are being developed as the program evolves and that the program is itself inherently flexible and responsive. These include protocols and guidelines outlining the orientation and induction process for both PIEC staff and children's services staff, clearly defining the role of the PIEC worker and appropriate tasks associated with the role and issues around communication and record keeping. In some cases, but not all, the uncertainty and disagreement around the role of the PIEC worker caused tension between children's services staff and PIEC workers. For example, one participant commented:

> …in the beginning there was a very definite feeling in the staff that this is our centre and who's this person coming in to tell us..what we should be doing. There were lots of issues about confidentiality. The staff were very protective of how much should this person have access to our records and we sat down really early on and said this is how it'll work (director).

Guidelines and protocols are important in standardising the implementation of the program across areas. There is a need to balance the capacity for the PIEC program to be a context-responsive approach, sensitive to the requirements of individual sites, with guidelines and protocols that both PIEC workers and children's services staff know and support. This is particularly the case as the role of the PIEC workers and project leaders in supporting staff and changing practice can be quite delicate at times.

*Directors*

Directors were supportive of the PIEC program and felt involved in its implementation. For some there was a lack of clarity in the way the program had been initially communicated to them. A number of people reported that they had not been asked if they wanted it, rather, they had been told that the PIEC program was coming to their centres or preschools. The reasons for individual sites being selected was not always made clear, and some managers reported feeling anxious, at the time, that they were being chosen as a very high need or poorly managed. None of the directors we spoke with still felt like this, but they still were unsure of the reasoning behind selection.

Directors reported a high administrative burden imposed by being involved in PIEC meetings and planning, and this claim was supported by other key personnel. The PIEC program uses most if not all of the directors' allocated administration time. No-one reported that this is having an impact on the program or the operations of the centre or preschool, but only because the usual administration is being done in directors' own time. This is not sustainable in the long term. Directors emphasised that time spent in PIEC administration is valuable, but some compensation for this time would be very useful.

## 3.4   Implementation

*Support for PIEC workers*

In some cases the PIEC worker was supported by an existing relationship with staff in partner organisations or the sites themselves, but in other cases the role and responsibilities of the PIEC worker was not clearly defined or understood.

This lack of clarity is related in part to the lack of documentation described above in Section 3.3, and also happened because the PIEC program was new and no-one really knew how it was going to work at a day to day level in the centres. Participants agreed that commitment from the partner organisations was vital if the program was to be successful. Commitment and support from management from partner organisations was more robust if there was a sound understanding of the theoretical and practical application of the three main components of the PIEC program including attachment theory and the Circle of Security, the social and emotional development of children, and the connection to community. PIEC staff highlighted the importance of providing this groundwork via training sessions to management, children's services staff and PIEC staff without formal training in attachment theory prior to the PIEC worker starting work in the centre or soon after commencing.

Cooperation from within the centres and preschools was more likely if management within partner organisations actively supported the program. Similarly, support of directors is another key element of a successful implementation process to facilitate connections to staff and parents. As one PIEC worker stated:

> Also, the Director….is very supportive.. in the day to day running of the PIEC program… when I'm not there I know she's got that in her sights and she's supporting that and making sure that the program goes beyond my presence (PIEC worker).

Time management is difficult for PIEC workers as they have to balance time in the centres with time in administration and planning and, in some cases conducting training sessions for partner organisations and children's services staff. Both PIEC workers and staff emphasised that 21 hours per week in total is not very much time.

Generally PIEC workers were satisfied with management structures and their relationships with partner organisations, centre management and the Benevolent Society. Most felt that they were well supported and valued the layered supervision and peer support structures in place, however the degree of satisfaction varied from areas to area. In a few cases participants reported that the strategic management, in particular the implementation process, despite improvements over time, still required further refinement. It was evident from the interviews with PIEC workers employed at different points in the development of the program that the orientation and implementation process now in place for both the PIEC and children's services staff had improved but it was acknowledged by both PIEC staff and management that this was an evolving process requiring adjustments and revisions.

*Support for children's services staff*

Key personnel and staff emphasised the need for a program like the PIEC program to be introduced gradually, while accommodating the particularities of individual centres, staff and relationships. As with the introduction of the PIEC program, the process of implementation caused some confusion and uncertainty amongst staff. Gradual introductions of the PIEC worker and activities into the routine operations of the centre were welcomed: for example, a PIEC worker attending a staff meeting before starting work. Managers emphasised the importance of staff 'ownership' of changes. They argued that new strategies have to be centre-specific because a lot

depends on individual staff: how long they have been in the field; how open to changes they are; and how confident in their own practice they feel.

In some cases, according to interview participants, the PIEC program was initially described to staff as something to support them, with little detail. Children's services staff, in some sites were not then well prepared for what the program actually involves, which includes monitoring of their work and advice on how to change it. Some staff felt that they could be better supported in other ways.

The PIEC program's approach and theory was greeted with some scepticism, not because of what it is, but because of changes over time in theories and practice of child care. For experienced staff and managers who have been in the field a long time, the PIEC program is one in a long line of innovations. However it was noted by PIEC staff that a noticeable change in staff willingness to embrace the program occurred once training in attachment and Circle of Security was provided.

The administrative burden of the PIEC program was described as quite high in some cases: for example, a two hour meeting at the end of the work day was not felt to be the best conditions for staff to learn about new programs. Completion of the survey instruments for the outcomes component of this evaluation was also time-intensive.

> As a director…it takes..jobs off my hands and frees my time up but then it replaces itself with meetings and generally making sure that everything is smooth…and [that the PIEC worker is] getting what they need from the staff (director).

*Support for families*

All the parents who spoke to us were very supportive of the PIEC program and welcomed it as additional expertise and improvements to the quality of their children's experience of children's services. Most parents were unaware of the detail of the program. For example one parent commented:

> I'm still not quite sure how it works in the sense that, is PIEC regularly reporting on children in terms of speaking to parents on a regular basis …or are they giving something in writing to the parents? Is it up to the parents to ask or will the PIEC worker go and speak to a parent if they see a  special problem (parent).

Staff reported that some parents are still unaware of the presence of the PIEC program in their centres.

Some parents had attended the information or other sessions associated with the PIEC program. They all associated the PIEC program with extra expertise and attention to their children's needs, and found the PIEC workers very supportive and helpful. In some cases the PIEC worker has been working intensively with individual parents and children with high needs.

## 3.5   Conditions for Change

There were a number of characteristics of *settings* that fostered openness to change and ready acceptance of what the PIEC program entails. These include: a workplace

environment of security and respect; time taken to build relationships; gradual introduction of changes; and support for staff at all levels in changing practice.

*Security and respect*: research into change management in human services agencies shows that changing practice can be difficult to accomplish (Nutley, Walter and Davies, 2003). We found that in workplaces where staff felt their expertise and practice knowledge was respected during the introduction of the PIEC program, and the PIEC worker adapted to the centre's operating culture, implementation seems to have been smoother than in other sites.

*Time taken to build relationships*: centre managers and staff reported that parents and children need time to adjust to new faces, including the PIEC workers. In some cases rapport between parents and staff has been built up over many years and parents feel comfortable in turning to staff they know for advice and support. Equally, staff practices of reacting to children's behaviour and managing relationships with parents has been developed over a long period of time in many cases. Because the PIEC worker is expected to intervene in, or at least contribute to, relationships between staff and parents *and* between staff and children, it will take time to build knowledge, relationships and trust.

*Gradual introduction of changes*: a number of staff reported that one reason the PIEC program works well is because it reconfigures rather than reverses usual practice. The PIEC program is seen to give more depth and detail, or provide a new vocabulary or theoretical basis for practice knowledge, or to introduce subtle changes. The program is also seen to give value to the work done for children's social and emotional needs and recognition that this work is just as important as other kinds of work, such as work around children's cognitive development. For example, staff in one site reported feeling affirmed as well as getting new information.

> I'm getting more of a feedback. It's kind of like having that extra pair of eyes, extra pair of ears, and they can fill you in (child care/preschool staff).

There were also a number of characteristics of *PIEC workers* that appear to foster change and acceptance. This happened when the PIEC worker:

- adopted the practices that are usual to the centre/preschool;
- was familiar with early childhood settings and PIEC's theoretical basis;
- occasionally assisted with cleaning, caring and routine duties;
- worked as part of the team;
- was unobtrusive; and
- took time to get to know the staff and parents.

These characteristics were found in most sites, and the PIEC workers were welcomed as valuable additions in all cases. As one worker commented when talking about the characteristics of effective PIEC workers:

> …willingness to just be in the environment rather than being involved in terms of suggesting and commenting and trying to

> solve. For a worker to be really effective…the worker that, sort of holds back and takes their cues from the staff …and doesn't go in with I have an answer for your problem and this is what you need to do…it's helped with the reflection of the staff, it's given them room to grow in terms of their own reflection (director).

We found that in many cases 'refreshers' in communicating the role of the PIEC worker will be valuable. This is partly because good relationships with staff and children can blur the boundaries between the PIEC workers and other staff over time. When PIEC staff lend a hand in routine tasks this can help foster good relationships and trust, but also risks the expectation that PIEC staff will always be able to act as an extra staff member. This will likely be a particular danger in sites where resources are stretched and staff shortages common.

## 3.6   Barriers and Facilitators to Change

Some resistance to changing practice was evident when children's services staff report that their knowledge of 'what works' for individual children is better than the model of care proposed by the PIEC program. For example, nurturing and responding to children's needs is central to the program and one of its aims is to change practice to respond differently to children with 'difficult' behaviour, to be more nurturing, more responsive to children's vulnerability, and less controlling. Some staff, however, reported that their practice is *already* nurturing and responsive to what is best for particular children, and that when changes are suggested they are often things that have already been tried. This example should be considered as an illustration only but demonstrates some broader difficulties around implementing change while respecting practice knowledge. It suggests that engagement with staff may need to be at the theoretical as well as the practical level, and that training in children's needs should reflect and make use of staff knowledge about behaviour and development.

Supporting this, change seemed to have been easiest in sites where there was a focus on the theory behind the PIEC program and the emphasis on relationships and children's needs. Concepts such as the Circle of Security and playspaces were resisted in some sites but have been welcomed over time. As one staff member commented:

> With some staff the knowledge that's used around Circle of Security became a little overwhelming at times. So we spoke to the workers about putting it into the context of what we do in a day, to be able to explain it. So instead of just using this Circle of Security where we go in and out, using a child that they know or getting us to have a situation so you can explain the process better … giving it a real experience (child care/preschool staff).

Recognition of attachment in practice was described by more than one participant as 'like a light going on' for staff. For some staff this occurred as a result of the training and information sessions provided by PIEC staff, while for others it occurred while observing children and their interactions. In a number of sites the easiest and most effective way to introduce the PIEC program was to emphasise the new language for existing practices and the development of what was already in place.

As discussed in section 3.4 management and directors influence how the program is promoted and integrated within the centres. If the program is valued and promoted positively then support from children's services staff is more likely. This provides more conducive conditions for staff to learn about the program and implement changes in practice. As one PIEC worker commented:

> If someone sees the value of PIEC… and is willing to try and integrate that then it works, but if people see it as … an imposition … then it feels like another thing put on top of them and another thing that has to be done…. (PIEC worker).

The relationship between the Benevolent Society and centre-based children's services was valued very highly, but one participant argued that the strong badging of the PIEC program as a Benevolent Society program makes it difficult to incorporate the program into the core business of a centre or preschool and to include it in planning and other strategic decisions. At the same time, it was recognised that the PIEC program has to be visible as an addition to centres or preschools so the benefits and innovations of the program are clear.

Limited time available for PIEC workers to talk to staff, and for staff to step back and reflect on the information provided by PIEC workers, was a common issue raised in the interviews. PIEC workers recognized the considerable physical and emotional demands placed on children's services workers in their day-to-day work environment. These conditions and operational regulations made it difficult to have either group training sessions or one to one time with workers to discuss and reflect on changes in practice as they could not be taken off the floor unless covered by relief staff or paid overtime to attend after hours meetings. PIEC workers often had to discuss interventions and changes in practice with staff while staff supervised children in the playground or attended to their physical needs. As one staff member said:

> [You have] half a head in the conversation and a half a head looking at what's happening (child care/preschool staff).

Strategies to access children's services staff used by some PIEC workers included altering their hours of work so that they accessed staff early in the morning before their shifts began, changing their days of work in order to connect with different members of staff and attending staff meetings.

Implementing a program such as PIEC requires considerable skills on the part of the PIEC worker. They require sound theoretical knowledge of attachment theory and the Circle of Security in addition to the ability to work within the context of two organisations and to change practice. Recruitment and retention of staff in one area in particular was problematic and delayed the implementation of the program.

The PIEC program is also about connecting families to community and support more broadly, and this will be quite difficult in many cases. This is reflected in the emphasis placed on this aspect of the program in each area, with only one making considerable headway. There are at least two reasons for this. The first relates to what is known about connecting families to services. Families who need services and support often already have them, and when families who are in need of support but do not have it there are often complex reasons. Families who are very vulnerable or have

a number of different needs present a challenge to all services, including early childhood services (Liabo, Gibbs and Underdown, 2004; Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe, 2004). The question of what to deliver and how is also important. There is some evidence that starting 'where the family is at' and tailoring services to individual needs can be effective, but at the same time there is an increasing emphasis in policy and practice on introducing standardised services and support models that are known to be effective (Watson, 2005). The second reason is time. Typically, bringing about changes through direct interventions with parents takes time, and works best when there are specific, clearly defined goals, which may also take some time to devise (Moran and Ghate, 2005). The PIEC program is being evaluated over a relatively short period of time, and evaluations of other programs suggest that this may not be sufficient to show significant change in outcomes that relate to parenting or access to services (Carpenter, Griffin and Brown, 2005; Thomson, valentine, Hoffmann and Fisher, 2004).

These dilemmas are particularly pressing for the PIEC program, which is based both on standardised theory-driven model and an emphasis on responsiveness and relationships. In addition, centre-based children's services and regions have had different emphases and focused on different aspects of the PIEC program: so some centres introduced playspaces immediately, others have focused on connecting parents to support. Some areas have changed the format and content of what is being delivered in order to better respond to the characteristics of parents in the area and aid retention in the programs.

One of the innovations of the PIEC program is that its emphasis is on children's services staff rather than parents, and we found that it was most readily accepted and seems most innovative in centres and preschools that focus on staff-child relationships rather than parents. Many families across the regions have difficulties and needs that are not readily addressed by any one intervention, but the practices and understandings of staff are easier to change. In order that the program remains identifiable as an attachment-based approach to centre-based care it seems necessary to focus on staff-child relationships and staff understanding of children's behaviours. It is important that the PIEC program connect parents to services and provide information and training to parents, but this type of intervention is known to be very difficult, time and resource intensive, and with difficult-to-measure effects. The innovations of the PIEC program are in other areas than direct interventions with parents.

Notwithstanding this, participants reported promising signs and increasing engagement of parents with both services that the PIEC program is running (such as coffee mornings and parenting information sessions) and with services that the PIEC program has brokered (such as speech therapists coming into the centre/preschool). However it was acknowledged by all PIEC staff that establishing connections with families was difficult when PIEC staff are only in the centres or preschools part-time and parents are usually rushing to either drop off or pick up their children. All PIEC workers recognised that establishing relationships with parents took time and planned to prioritise this in the future by using several strategies including being a visible presence in the centre and preschools, varying their hours or work within the centres or preschools to meet parents and providing information via newsletters.

## 3.7    Key Changes

The length of time the PIEC program has been operating in the six sites involved in the process evaluation varies. This in turn influences the degree to which changes have occurred. However, the interviews revealed that considerable changes seem to have resulted from the implementation of PIEC, although it varies from site to site depending on the emphasis placed on the different components of the PIEC program.

*Changes for staff*

A number of directors stated that having the PIEC program in their centres and preschools 'lightened their load' in terms of providing information to staff and parents about parenting and child development issues and making referrals to external services and groups.

For most, from the perspective of both directors and staff, the introduction of the PIEC program has led to an increase in staff's reflective capacity and the language used in relation to children's social and emotional development. Many staff now reflected on how they worked with the children, how they formed attachments and developed trust and were more willing to just spend time with children, at their level, down on the floor playing. That said, some staff and directors felt they operated in this manner prior to the introduction of the PIEC program. A director said:

> I've got a staff member who is very focused on everything has to run smoothly and all the routine tasks have to be done. And she'll run herself ragged making sure the whole group runs well but she forgets to spend time with the children, there's been an improvement over that (director).

One staff member commented:

> it makes you more aware of the needs of the children in terms of the [PIEC] worker has been really big on children's emotional development and the children here often have lots of other needs so that's made me a bit more conscious of what's happening in their families …you're a bit more understanding of the families and children (child care/preschool staff).

The PIEC workers use a number of strategies to bring out changes in practice within the child care settings including formal and informal training sessions, attending staff meeting and providing modelling when interacting with children. One staff member commented:

> I think it means that we're a lot more mindful of children's social and emotional stability and how to achieve that and we're consciously thinking and how we can meet this throughout the day and that's made us a lot more mindful (child care/preschool staff).

For some staff the introduction of playspaces has meant they have a greater capacity to observe the children and focus on their needs as they move in and out of activities.

> …when we're sitting down in the playspaces we can actually have a wide view .. and then we can detect any situation that may come up…we can cover a smaller area because the other person on the other side is covering that area (child care/preschool staff)

One staff member noticed that the people in her room seemed less stressed as a result of the introduction of playspaces. She stated:

> I've noticed people aren't as stressed in my room, it's a little bit more calm because the kids are settled and we're settled and vice versa and we know that at that time, it doesn't matter what else is happening in the centre, this is our time, it's quite a nice, relaxing start to the day and throughout the day (child care/preschool staff).

Another positive change as a result of the PIEC program is that staff feel more supported in their often emotionally and physically demanding work. For example:

> Sometimes I might be too close to the situation and she [the PIEC worker] can stand back a little bit…She's also good for staff in terms of observing a child. She can go into the room and stand back and not have to worry about the day to day what's going on and … see things that we don't see…then she can then relay back to staff, she's not part of the ratio (director).

The PIEC workers supported staff by providing information, being present in the room to observe interactions, providing hands on assistance and being available to research and discuss issues and provide feedback to staff.

In the area where the PIEC program has focused more directly on linking families with the service system staff noted that they now were more aware of the range of services available to support families in the local area. As one director commented:

> Our referrals now, instead of bouncing somebody and they [external service provides] say they can't help you, we're making more meaningful referrals because the [PIEC worker] took the time to go round and meet everyone in the local area (director).

Participants were asked to rate the usefulness of the PIEC program with 1 being not useful at all and 10 being extremely useful. Overwhelmingly interview participants thought the program was very useful, with the majority giving it a rating of 7 or above. However most stated they wanted more time with the PIEC worker. In the few instances where the program was given a 5 or a 6, its potential usefulness was also noted. Two child care/preschool staff rated it as 10 because of the positive impact of the program for children, parents and staff. One participant commented:

> A 10, because I see the progress in the room and in the routines, in the environment and with the parents and the children (child care/preschool staff).

*Changes for parents*

As a result of the PIEC program some parents had been linked into additional services such as libraries and playgroups. The PIEC worker in some sites had helped individual families organise additional funding and support for their children. Parents who attended the information and parenting sessions found them very informative and useful. One parent had shared information from these sessions with other parents in her community. Other parents spoke about how these sessions had helped them to understand their children better and provided them with techniques and strategies to assist them in their parenting. One parent, when talking about her understanding of the PIEC program, stated:

> [It's] about understanding the emotional situations that lead children into behaviours that upset them and upset everyone else and trying to tackle that differently. I'm delighted that they're extending it to parents…In a nutshell what it's giving me is so far…the thought that I need to think about what I'm doing … and even that pause empowers me to react differently (parent).

*Changes for children*

Child care/preschool staff reported that one of the main benefits of the PIEC program for children was having an extra person who had the capacity to just focus on their needs and interact with them without having to look after their physical needs or the surrounding environment. It also gave the children another adult to develop trusted relationships. According to some staff strategies such as playspaces and separation techniques have provided children with a more comfortable and safe environment, which helps children develop self- confidence. One staff member commented:

> …more and more children are building that  relationship.. it's the security they know that someone's going to be there and when they come in the morning.. they're quite happy to, kind of, separate if someone's there with them.. it's an easier transition…they're more eager to go out have a play if they know that someone's there for them…it builds their confidence and their social skills (child care/preschool staff).

# 4   Conclusion

The principles of the PIEC program are being incorporated into the centres and preschools, but participants emphasised that it will take time and support for this to happen. The PIEC worker is only present in child care centres or preschools for a short time each week, which is likely to extend the implementation and 'settling in' period. Staff in many of the sites are working in difficult circumstances and some have staff with expertise generated from years of practice but little formal training. It will take time and support for the PIEC program to be incorporated into practice in these cases. There are differences across and within regions some sites have taken twelve months to be ready to implement playspaces. Other sites introduced playspaces almost immediately and some of those reported that playspaces were formalising what had more or less been in place anyway.

Incorporating PIEC principles into the routine operations of centre-based children's services will happen to some degree over time, but interview participants emphasised that the program cannot be sustained without ring-fenced funding and resources. Key PIEC activities such as reflective practice and layered supervision cannot be incorporated into the day-to-day activities of even the best resourced centre-based children's services without ongoing support.

Changes to how staff talk about, relate to and reflect on children's behaviour may also be more time and resource-intensive in the short term than older ways of working. For example, one manager reported that the time taken in staff meetings to reflect on children's needs increased from about five minutes to more than an hour due to the PIEC program. Unfortunately this could not be continued as it took up too much of the staff meeting, but reflective practice and thinking is more evident on the floor than it used to be. This is an example of changes brought about by the PIEC program requiring extra support for a time, before they can become sustained without specific resources.

The PIEC program is about changing practice on the basis of knowledge, but there are different ways of thinking about knowledge and expertise. One way is conceptualising it as introducing expertise into the child care centres/preschools and educating staff. Another way is to think of knowledge as generated by the operations in practice of the PIEC program, the expertise of children's services workers, and the expertise of PIEC workers. In this second way, rather than thinking of the PIEC program as introducing new knowledge 'top down', new knowledge is produced by specific workers in the specific contexts of individual centre-based children's services (Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, 2002; Nutley et al., 2003; Schorr, 2003). PIEC theory and program design are among the ingredients for change, but the PIEC program will change according to the knowledge and input of local workers. This second way of thinking about the production of new knowledge and changing practice has advantages and difficulties. It has the potential to be a more nuanced and holistic approach to change than top down or 'engineering' approaches to putting research into practice, but takes time and is context-specific. It offers a more dynamic understanding of how theory becomes practice than other models, but raises questions about how much the program can be 'adapted' while retaining its key elements. How responsive the PIEC program is to local context, and to what extent the practice knowledge of children's

services workers can be incorporated into the program, will depend to an extent on the resources and time available for implementation.

Overall the PIEC program was highly valued by all interview participants including partner organisations, child care centre and preschool staff and families. As one Director stated:

> I think it fits in really well because the needs of the families and also supports staff in the ever changing child care industry. We're so busy not only with the children and families and the paperwork that has to be done, to have that extra person there, as a support network, is really good.

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