

# Emerging Minds.

National  
Workforce  
Centre for Child  
Mental Health

## Consultation or co-design?

*This resource is part of [Emerging Minds' Child and Family Partnerships Toolkit](#)*

**Below are excerpts from interviews with Helen Francis (Emerging Minds' National to Local Manager) and Kerry Hawkins (a family partner), discussing the difference between consultation and co-design, and ideas for organisations to reflect on when working in this space.**

**Q:** What has it meant to you to be able to offer some of your experiences through family partnerships?

**Kerry:** Being able to offer our experiences is a really meaningful exercise. It brings to us a sense that we are being heard in an environment where very often we are not seen and heard by services. It is an incredibly validating experience. And so, not only do you feel like a legitimate citizen of the world again after being so delegitimised for so long, which can be a very, very healing process.

It also brings a sense that maybe, just maybe, we are contributing to some enormous work and we are in some way shaping the changes that we want to see within services. It is a really, really rewarding process to go through.

**Q:** Can you describe what co-design is and why it's important?

**Helen:** A co-design process becomes a really important way of gathering voices from peoples lived experience and bringing them in to develop something – a product, a resource, a change in thinking, an understanding – in order to move our work forward and make it the best it can be. It becomes a way of gathering information, developing it with a really clear purpose and consolidating it, reflecting it back, refining it, consolidating it again. So, it becomes quite circular and quite reflective as people are able to put their input back in as we refine, redevelop, reflect.

**Q:** What do you think are the strengths of the co-design process?

**Helen:** I think the strengths of the co-design process are that people feel really connected to the work, but also, I think it adds an authenticity to the work. People can see that it's not us sitting in an office writing or creating something; that the voice really comes from those that we've worked with, and that it has been an evolving process to ensure that we get the best quality outcomes that we can and to ensure that lived experience voices are honoured in the best way possible.

**Q:** What are some of the challenges of the co-design process?

**Helen:** It really needs to be quite clear at the very beginning what the purpose of the co-design process is. How much can we include an individual voice; and how do we explain to people that by bringing lots of voices together, it may not be their voice in the end that is the loudest, but a reflective conversation that captures all of those voices together.

So the biggest challenge is being really clear at the beginning: what are the parameters of what we are doing; what is the purpose; what are the hopes for what we want to do; who is the audience; how can we capture those voices in what we are aiming to do; and how do we honour all of the voices and create a platform to give the voices equal weight.

Now when you're working with families, each person's contribution is one person's contribution, so it's a challenge then to give equal weight to all of the contributions, and I think that has to be managed in a really respectful way.

**Q:** Can you describe, from your perspective, why it is important we get the language right around co-design?

**Kerry:** When families like us think about co-design, we are thinking that organisations are really interested in

The National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program.

The NWC is led by Emerging Minds and delivered in partnership with the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), the Parenting Research Centre (PRC), the Australian National University (ANU) and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP).

Visit our web hub today!  
**Emerging  
minds.  
com.au**



JUNE 2020

understanding that gap between what we experience and what is delivered and working to address that gap.

However, I have become aware of a lot of organisations using the language of co-design, and holding workshops to present their material to people for feedback, but not really having a strong understanding of the distinction between consultation and co-design. I have observed that most organisations have come to understand the policy landscape, and to believe that they should be doing this thing called 'working with lived experience', but not resourcing it, not fully understanding it, but calling it co-design when in fact it is not.

**Q:** What would you say to organisations working in this space of consultation through to co-design?

**Kerry:** I think it is probably incumbent upon organisations to develop a much stronger sense of literacy around what this process of co-design is, right through to the spectrum of participation around consultation. Organisations may not always be resourced to do co-design very well, but at least if they are going to do consultation, call it 'consultation'. Let's not over-reach our understandings of what things are and mislead people, and probably inadvertently mislead the organisation as well.

I would ask organisations when starting out doing work that they think is co-design, to first review their purpose and processes, as it may actually be consultation.

**Q:** Do you think it's ideal that every project is co-designed?

**Helen:** I don't think it would be realistic for every project to be co-designed, because one, the time it takes to be respectful in a co-design process can be many, many months; in fact, it can be 6-12 months just to get a product or resource developed in a co-designed way. You're asking people to give their time voluntarily, even though you are contributing to that time by paying for it, so they need to fit their life into all of this as well, so it's quite a long process as you collect, reflect, refine, collect, reflect, refine.

So, with short-term costing and funding projects you wouldn't be able to produce a good flow of work if everything were co-designed. I think there are other ways to garner information, and it might be actually developing a product and resource with the best intent and then getting some feedback towards the end. Now that's not the ideal, but in today's world of short-term funding we need to be able to develop products as best we can in the most useful way that we can.

So, co-design just isn't always effective, it's very costly, and a very slow process, although it's an honouring process to do that work.

**Q:** What are genuine, non-tokenistic ways of partnering with children and families when co-design is not an option?

**Helen:** I think there are a range of ways to get child and family partnership without a full-on co-design process, and I think that's by creating as many ways as we can to talk to people. It's also using the voices we have heard along the way when we can, bringing them in to inform other pieces of work.

If you're working with a group of people on a particular process, there's actually a lot of information that comes into that process. So, it's about not losing that information and using that for the next piece of work that you do, in a way that is effective and efficient.

I think the other way is running things by people, having conversations and keeping connected with people the best way that you can as an organisation. And it might be, 'we've just started work on this, can I just have a conversation?' It might be, 'we're developing this, would you like to have a read over and give us your thoughts?' There're many ways of involving those voices in a respectful way.

**Q:** Can you talk about the importance of relationships in doing this work?

**Kerry:** The relationship has been personal. It has been authentic. It has been respectful, and it has been reciprocal. I think, we think about co-design in terms of these theoretical understandings around mutuality and respect, but when I think about my relationships with Emerging Minds' staff, I think they are activated and they are real, and that is a really quite rare and precious commodity.

The National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program.

The NWC is led by Emerging Minds and delivered in partnership with the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), the Parenting Research Centre (PRC), the Australian National University (ANU) and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP).

Visit our web hub today!  
**Emerging  
 minds.  
 com.au**

