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How to help parents find the right parenting support for them

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What is this resource about?

This guide is designed to assist practitioners in having conversations with parents regarding the sources of their parenting information and support. It aims to help you and the parent identify what type of support the parent is seeking (their motivation) and the most appropriate sources for this support. Ultimately, it will help you build a parent's capacity to access the best quality information or support to suit their needs.

The guide covers conversations with parents that support them to make good decisions on a day-to-day basis when they self-identify a need for parenting information or support. At other times, you may wish to provide specific guidance about sources of information related to issues identified within a consultation. *Sharing information with parents about children's social and emotional wellbeing: A step-by-step approach* presents nine key steps that any practitioner can follow to ensure the information they provide to parents is high-quality, useful and relevant to the family's circumstances.

Help and support seeking

Parents seek information, help and support for many different reasons. Similarly, they often have to, or choose to go to different places to source that information, help and support.

Types of support

To find the best or most appropriate support for a parent, it is helpful to first identify the type of support that is needed. What, specifically, is the support for?



Consider each of these situations:

- **Informational support:** Is the parent seeking information about a specific topic?
'My son is going to childcare next year and I want to make sure he is toilet trained before he goes, but I don't know much about it. Where can I find some good information about toilet training?'
- **Practical support:** Is the parent seeking a solution to a specific problem?
'My usually happy 11-year-old daughter came home from school last week upset and angry. Since then she has locked herself in her room for hours and won't tell us anything or speak with anyone. I just don't know what to do.'
- **Emotional support:** Does the parent just want to share their problem and hear from others who are experiencing the same thing or something similar?
'My kids just won't leave me alone, even for a few minutes. They're always coming to me to do something with or for them or to referee a fight or argument they're having. They rely on me for everything!'

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More information about these different types of support is provided below.

Informational support

Informational support is useful when someone wants help to answer a question or wants to be more informed about a topic or issue. The information they seek can help them decide on a course of action – or whether to take any action at all. This sort of support can also be used to help a parent normalise a current circumstance or experience.

Informational support is often sought proactively. The parent is interested in learning more about something, usually before it becomes a problem that they need to address. For instance, in the toileting example above, the parent may simply be asking what is developmentally common – should my three-year-old be toilet trained, and does he need to be toilet trained before he goes to childcare?

Depending on the information the parent accesses in response to the issue, they may choose to do something about it (e.g. begin making an effort at toilet training), or they may decide that it isn't really an issue at this stage (e.g. do nothing). In this example, if the parent decides they'd like to do something so they don't have to worry about supplying extra nappies and changes of clothing to the childcare provider, then they may need a different type of support – practical support.



Practical support

Practical support refers to the help someone seeks to resolve a problem. Unlike informational support, practical support is more reactive; the parent is responding to something.

This type of support usually involves determining a plan of action to try and do something about the challenge the parent describes. Take the earlier example of the parent expressing concern about their daughter's sadness and isolation. In this instance, the parent is looking for an appropriate way to manage this situation. This may include:

- strategies and ideas for opening up the lines of communication between the parent and child
- using open questions to find out what happened to make the child upset, and whether any further action needs to be taken; or
- teaching the child how to develop and use appropriate coping strategies.

Of course, some parents may have the skills and knowledge to manage the situation, but still find it challenging and want to tell someone about how it makes them feel. At this point, a parent may be seeking emotional support.

Emotional support

This type of support usually involves the parent seeking the opportunity to share and talk about their concerns. Their aim at this point may not be to do anything about the issue, but simply to 'offload' or 'debrief'. This type of support often works to help people feel that they are not alone – that there are others who are experiencing the same thing or are sympathetic to the parent's situation and experiences.

These types of support are not always distinct or exclusive. You may find parents want more than one type of support for the same issue, or they may work through all three types of support when experiencing an issue.

For example, while the parent who finds that they have little time to themselves may initially be seeking emotional support by expressing frustration with the situation to others, they may also find this is a common situation that many parents of young children find themselves in (informational support) and that there are a range of evidence-based strategies that can be applied to help them to manage the situation (practical support).

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Sources of support

The best resource for one type of support may not always be suited to another type. The friend or peer who can provide a parent with the best emotional support may not have the resources or knowledge to provide the most effective informational or practical support. Similarly, the best source of evidence-based parenting strategies (practical support), may not be able to provide the emotional support that a parent needs or wants.

Accordingly, parents can and do go to many different people and places to get information to help them support their children's development and social and emotional wellbeing. These can range from family and friends to less 'personal' sources, such as their child and family health nurse, general practitioner, early childhood educator or school teacher. They may also gather information via other sources such as social media, magazines, books, and websites.

Sources of support can be classified as personal vs professional and direct vs indirect:

	PERSONAL (Informal; unmoderated)	PROFESSIONAL (Formal; moderated)
DIRECT	Family Friends	CFH Nurses, GPs, Paediatricians, Early childhood educators/Teachers
INDIRECT	Online (Facebook, etc.)	Websites (RCN, Parenting.com, etc.), Books, Magazines

It is important to note that all of these sources of information are valuable and can prove helpful in different ways. The key is knowing what each source is best at. This will make it easier for parents to find the right information to help them meet their specific need more quickly.



High-quality parenting information

Of course, these categories and the quality of information you get from each group can still vary substantially. For instance, not all family and friends are good listeners, but they may also provide information on strategies that have worked well for them. Similarly, not all parenting books and websites provide high-quality evidence-based information. Encouraging parents to apply a critical lens to practical information they receive, and to verify parenting advice against well-known sources, are important ways to increase their capacity to access high-quality information.

This is where the information in *Sharing information with parents about children's social and emotional wellbeing: A step-by-step approach* can be helpful. For example, you can enhance parents' uptake of, confidence in and use of high-quality parenting information by:

- being familiar with a range of quality, up-to-date sources of information on various topics or issues you can direct parents to
- taking steps to ensure information and resources provided are relevant and appropriate to the family's needs and circumstances; and
- arming them with questions to ask of the information they access, such as:
 - What are the qualifications and expertise of the person who wrote this?
 - Is the information current and balanced?
 - Is it realistic and doable?

So, to help parents decide **where** is the best place to go for help (family, friend, peer, or expert), it can be helpful to know **why** they're looking (they've got a problem they want fixed, or they just want to debrief and share their experience) and **what** they are looking for (information, a solution or advice, or a sympathetic ear).

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PROCESS	EXAMPLE INTERACTION
1. Show interest	<p>'So, you went to Facebook to find out about ...'</p> <p>OR</p> <p>'It's interesting to hear that you found out about ... via Facebook.'</p>
2. Be inquisitive	<p>'Did you try to find information anywhere other than Facebook?'</p> <p>OR</p> <p>'Can I just check with you about why you went to Facebook rather than somewhere else?'</p>
3. Check for success	'What do you think of what you found on Facebook?'
4. Seek permission to engage on the topic	'I'm interested in finding out why people go where they do for information and assistance, and whether it met their needs. Is it OK if I talk with you about this for a few minutes? Knowing this sort of information helps me to be more effective at my job.'
5. Share information	<p>'We know that there are generally three reasons why people seek parenting information. They all have to do with seeking support. The three types of support are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Informational support b. Practical support c. Emotional support <p>'Informational support is the support people seek to help them answer a question they may have. It is usually to check if something is common or "normal". For example, "At what age can you leave kids home alone for up to one hour during the day?"; "What's the most effective method of toilet training my child?"; or "Is it safe to put my 18-month-old in a big bed?"</p> <p>'The second type of support parents usually look for is practical support. This relates to seeking or getting help with something in a very practical way. For example, it is usually in response to questions such as, "How can I stop my daughter from slamming her door when I'm talking to her?"; "What can I do to stop my son from throwing a tantrum in the supermarket when I say he can't have a lolly?"; or "What is the best thing I can do when my child gets upset when I have to leave them at childcare?"</p> <p>'The third type of support parents commonly seek is emotional support. This is about wanting to debrief and usually doesn't involve looking for an answer or solution to a problem. For instance, they may want someone to listen to them and then respond with, "Gee, that sounds like a pretty difficult situation", or "Wow, I don't know how you coped with that. I would have been climbing the walls!", etc.</p> <p>'Some parents only need one of these types of support at any moment and some need all of them in relation to the same issue.</p> <p>'What we also know is that some people and resources are more helpful with some of these things than others. For example, family and friends are usually good at emotional support, while books and websites are not so good at it. On the other hand, you can get some really good informational and practical support from some websites, compared to information from friends.</p> <p>'It can be really helpful for you to think about what type of support you're after and then identify to whom or where you can go. That way, you're most likely to get the best available support to meet that need.'</p>
6. Check your understanding and seek agreement or clarity	<p>'So, it sounds like you were just after emotional support in this instance. Do you think that's right?'</p> <p>OR</p> <p>'So, it seems like you were after some practical support and you got a mixed bag of advice and guidance. Would you like to talk about some other options for high-quality information that might help with these sorts of issues?'</p>
7. Reinforce success and check for generalisation	<p>'And it also sounds like you got the support you wanted from your Facebook group. Is there anywhere else you can go to get emotional support? Who else in your circle of family, friends and acquaintances can you go to when you need support?'</p> <p>'What about if you were after some advice on what to do about that situation? Can you tell me where you might go for practical advice – or even good quality information about that issue, if that's what you were after?'</p>

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