

# Embedding parent voice in the design of services

## A resource for professionals designing services with birth parent contact

The 2019 [Victorian Client voice framework for community services](#) provides guidance and overarching principles on embedding client voice in the design, evaluation and delivery of services. This is part of the growing recognition that safe and quality services cannot be delivered without the input of those who will ultimately use, and benefit from, these services. The Client voice framework for community services helps all community service providers, policy and program staff to seek, listen and act on the client voice.

The client voice framework supports:

- The client voice is essential for quality and safety
- Clients have expertise
- The client voice is part of everyone's role
- There are many client voices
- The client voice leads to action.

In this resource, we align the Client voice framework with our work in the Voice of Parents and other research. This resource aims to support organisations with embedding parent voices in the design of services.

### Embedding parent voice supports quality and safety enhancement

Parent voices in the design of services for parents are indicators of quality and safety. Their input into service design provides the greatest chance that services are responsive to parent needs and that services interactions are safe (including being culturally safe). Parents can help organisations to identify where potential harm may occur through service interactions and support the planning to prevent this. Organisations working with parents are unlikely to know if their service is effective and safe without the input of parent voice. Parents with lived experience should also be part of informing an organisation's understanding of service quality and safety.<sup>1</sup>

Embedding parent voice also supports service design to be consistent in its high quality, safe practice. Consistent application of principles in engaging parents can help to ensure that all families have equal access to best practice and participation opportunities. In the Voice of Parents, we identify six enablers of parent participation, including:

1. Respect and recognition
2. Advocacy and guidance
3. Building relationships
4. Empowering parents
5. Access to information
6. Connection and identity

For further information on what these enablers mean and how to implement them, see the *Voice of Parents' Model of Parent Participation* and framework.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2019). Client voice framework for community services. Retrieved from <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/201910/client-voice-framework-for-community-services.pdf>

## Parents have unique expertise in service use and their input should be sought

Parents have unique expertise in service use, borne from their lived experience. Effectively engaging parents in a conversation about their experience can help organisations to better understand their needs and priorities as a service user. Organisations designing services can draw on these valuable insights to target service provision and ensure access and engagement opportunities are built into the design, increasing its likelihood of success. The voices of diverse parents should be sought and valued throughout all touchpoints of services that they interact with (or will interact with), and their input should be evident in the final design. Parents with experience as service users can provide organisations with expertise in:

- what solutions are needed,
- what their aspirations are,
- what has previously worked to facilitate their engagement,
- what barriers may exist,
- how this might be best implemented to meet their needs,
- how they want to be included in ongoing review of service delivery.

In *Voice of Parents: A model for inclusion: Supporting participation of birth parents*, key learnings on how to plan, recruit and work with parents are discussed. This report also outlines guiding principles of ethical engagement with parents.

## Organisations create the environment that includes parent voice as part of everyone's role

In organisations that work with parents, the facilitation and inclusion of parent voices should be seen as part of everyone's role. Integrating participation processes into organisations requires planning and preparation; this needs backbone organisation support to be implemented before individual practitioners can be expected to engage parents in a meaningful way. Again, this approach supports a consistency of high quality and safe practice. Organisations can provide this backbone support by establishing an authorising environment that:

- is value-driven to include the voice of lived experience in service design,
- promotes a culture of including, listening, and acting on the voice of lived experience (for example, through use of quality feedback surveys, complaints/compliment forms, feedback forums, individual feedback at service delivery touch points),
- upskills staff to feel confident in engaging people with lived experience,
- encourages staff to be open-minded, curious and prepared to learn new and unexpected information,
- develops a policy landscape to support consistent best practice across the organisation,
- promotes practice models that use strengths-based, holistic approaches consistently across the organisation.

Staff can also be supported to include parent voices in their work by organisational planning that reduces other limiters of parent participation, such as short-term funding, high staff turnover, being overly formal, using language that is bureaucratic or filled with jargon.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> WACOSS (2016). Co-design principles to deliver community services in partnership in WA. Retrieved from <https://www.wacoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/WACOSS-Co-Design-Discussion-Paper-Revised-20160919.pdf>

## Parent voices are diverse and need uplifting

Organisations can also support the inclusion of parent voice by paying attention to the diverse needs and preferences of parents who may want to participate or should be represented. Parents and the families they live within are diverse, and can include all genders, ages, backgrounds, and abilities. Parents in contact with services such as child protection may also have multiple and complex needs which are not accommodated for in the design of services and therefore limits their inclusion. Parents with a history of service contact, particularly if it has been adversarial, might have difficulty trusting organisations with their voice or have difficulty seeing themselves as having expertise to contribute. They may also want to contribute their voice but not know how to access opportunities, where opportunities exist.

Proactive planning to support parents with overcoming barriers to participation may increase diversity of access to engagement opportunities. This could mean creating (or co-creating) organisational strategies for engaging parents who, in addition to the barriers listed above, may:

- experience environmental barriers (e.g. disability or pram access to the building),
- experience practical barriers (e.g. lack of transport, in need of childcare support),
- have limited access to internet or a computer/tablet,
- experience language barriers,
- experience cultural barriers,
- don't feel welcome to participate.

## Inclusion of parent voices leads to action

Ideally, services implement early and sustained engagement processes where an ongoing dialogue can occur and where feedback is listened to and actioned. This may look like the inclusion of parent voices in continuous improvement processes, where new ideas are tested and trialled so change can occur. Through processes like this, parents can experience increased satisfaction with the outcomes they achieve through service support. Organisations can support action by having a framework to measure client outcomes, and by having mechanisms for sharing best practice and innovation identified across the sector<sup>3</sup>.

Where parent voice is sought, but ultimately not used, organisations should have clear processes for providing that feedback to parents, so they remain aware of the impact of their engagement and can be convinced that their inclusion is genuine. Careful documentation processes should be implemented, with plans for minimal interpretation from staff to reduce the risk of diluting authentic parent voices.

Where possible, services design should consider expanding on a child-focused approach to support a family-focused approach. This can help to support the child within their family of origin, through increased engagement of parents and through increased positive parenting mechanisms. Child safety should still be prioritised at all times within this framework of practice, and any assessment of risk should also include the developmental risks associated with the child's separation and disconnection from their birth parents.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2019). Client voice framework for community services. Retrieved from <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/201910/client-voice-framework-for-community-services.pdf>