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*Concurrent Paper*

**PaPa Bear - our experiences of developing (or making it up as we go along!)  
a playgroup for dads and their young children with additional needs**

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*'Excuse me this is my Daddy'...*

Samual age 5 years on arrival to PaPa Bear group with his Dad.

For the past three years our Yooralla Family Networks parent support programs have offered many opportunities for mothers who have children with additional needs to meet together, to share resources, their thoughts and feelings as well being able to spend time with a group of people who share similar experiences. Many times within these groups 'Dads,' and their role within the family, were discussed. Our Family networks groups identified that, within the working week, and the timetable of Early Childhood programs there are few opportunities for Dads, who worked, to access E.C.I. programs, Specialists and to seek answer to their own questions. All too often the Mother of the child with additional needs is the bearer of news and Dads receive information second hand.

In 2004, with support from 'The City of Casey access and equity grant' we piloted our first PaPa Bear group. These groups were initially offered 4 times each term on a Saturday morning. Over the past 12 months we have an established a core group have 10-12 Dads and their young children, with new families joining us each session. Within this presentation we will share with you our reasons why we chose a playgroup forum for a Dads group, our program design and how the program has been marketed. We will discuss how the program is staffed, evaluated and adapted in response to feedback from the Dads and our families within our E.C.I. programs. For example we now have included family get togethers and are inviting guest speakers along to our groups. Siblings have also been invited to join us to play, offering their mothers a morning of time to themselves. In this session I will discuss what we have learnt in developing our PaPa Bear program, share our written evaluations from our Dads and the Mums, what it has meant to their family. PaPa Bear will now continue and is to be funded through 'Local answers' Commonwealth funding. PaPa Bear enables our E.C.I. programs to offer a genuinely more wholistic service in which all members of the family can be actively involved and benefit.

Final words from Samual as he woke his Dad

*'Daddy today we go to PaPa bear*

*You can be Daddy bear, I can be Baby Bear and Mummy can stay home and be Goldilocks!'*

## **Introduction:**

*“Excuse me this is my Daddy”...Samual age 5 years on arrival to Papa Bear group with his Dad.*

What about the Dads? This question was discussed many times within our ECI team, Dads were actively encouraged to participate in their child’s Family service plans, join us on Family nights and within our centre based programs when ever they could. All to often the limitations of their working life, the operating hours (Monday to Friday) of our ECI centre meant many were unable to take up any of these opportunities, have access to our specialists and to ask and seek answer to their questions. All to often it was left to the Mothers relayed information about their child and their program. We have explored several options over the years with limited success, generally these groups were professionally driven and poorly attended-offering Dads groups within our program tended to go into the too hard basket.

*Family Networks:* Our Yooralla Family Networks parent support programs are offering opportunities for Mothers who have children with additional needs to meet together, to share resources, their thoughts and feelings as well being able to spend time with a group of people who share similar experiences. The need to develop programs to support the Dads was strongly identified by many Mothers in these groups. This motivated us to think again and together with the parents we started to plan.

- What would the program design be?
- How do we get Dads to the groups?
- How often? When? Where? Will groups be held?
- Who would these facilitate groups?
- Why would we provide the opportunity for Dads to meet together?
- How do we fund this program when our current ECI funding is already tight?
- What current programs for Dads are being offered?

As an ECI team, speaking with individual Dads and within our Family Networks support groups we started to find answers to our questions.

*Don Meyer’s words of wisdom:* I had the opportunity of meeting with Don Meyer in Seattle four years ago. Our discussion mainly focussed on the development of Sib groups, however part of our discussion was about groups for Dads who have children with additional needs. He advised the only groups he felt worked were when the Dads and their children were together. These words stayed with me.

*Mother Goose:* Our Yooralla southern ECI services offers ECI services play based programs and specialist support within inclusive playgroup, Preschool programs and generic services. For the past two years we have piloted a new program design for an Inclusive playgroup program known as Mother Goose inspired by The Parent Child Mother Goose program originating in Canada. The philosophy, program design and the experience team members gained in these playgroups formed the framework for our initial Papa Bear program. Parent Child Mother Goose also reminded us of the importance of the programs name and to actively consider how we market our groups.

*Pa Pa Bear:* I thank Carmel a fellow Yooralla Program Co Ordinator for our name. It has meaning to the children and the parents and has proved positive when applying for funding grants. We have also developed a Logo that we use on all our written notices and funding submissions.

*Getting started:* Our initial funding came from the City of Casey - Access and Equity Initiative Grant 2004-2005. This funding enabled us to pilot and develop our PaPa Bear playgroup for Dads and their young children with additional needs. It gave us the chance to trial and develop the pilot playgroup program design. We now have funding for a further 3 years through the Commonwealth 'Local Answers' program, this will enable us to continue to offer, develop and evaluate this program.

*Program development:* From our research and experience with Family Networks and Mother Goose groups we have now designed a PaPa Bear playgroup that offers free playtime, snack time together and a circle/ story time for Dads and their children having lots of fun.

*Our Papa Bear Playgroup model:* Is about each Dad spending time with his child playing, observing and being with other Dads. They can do things 1:1, join in group fun, cooking, singing songs and participate in story time. Groups are held four times a term- initially on Saturday mornings.

*“when do we sit around and say My name is..... and my son has Autism”*

This question was asked of us on our first session by one of the Dads, he was very relieved to hear we had no plans of doing that and he was here to spend time with his son and in our ECI centre.

*Facilitators role:* Our team member are now taking turns to participate in the program their role is to set up the environment, the play experiences are carefully chosen, we observe, support and encourage the development of play skills through role modelling and facilitating. We are available as a resource, to answer questions and support problem solving. The team members have encouraged the Dads to provide formal and informal feedback after each session and this is included in their evaluation and planning for the next session. “nice to have time to play without some one telling you what you should be doing?” a quote on the evaluation sheet from one of our Dads.

*Evaluations:* Feedback has been sort from the Dads, Mums, children and team members through informal chats, formal written “How are we going?” and suggestion sheets. The response from the Families has been very positive and all Dads commented in our evaluations about their enjoyment of the groups and how much they appreciated the opportunity to be involved with their children and the other children in the group to play and sing together. The Mothers were also given the opportunity to express their thoughts about Papa Bear, all agreed how important the program had been to their family.

*On going program:* These evaluations have enabled us to develop our initial playgroup program. We now include night info sessions for Dads eg. We held a “Let’s communicate” workshop with the Speech Pathologist and “what is a Therapist and what do they mean for your child?” so far, others are being planned for 2006. The Dads had requested Family events and now we end each term with a family picnic and playtime. Each term we now include a Hydrotherapy / water familiarization session and are rostering specialist team members to participate in Papa Bear groups to enable the Dads to have direct access to them. Siblings now have joined our playgroups Within our Family Networks program we are aiming in 2006 to develop a Parent Leader program for Dads. It is hope these Dads will take the role of providing support and advocacy for Dads who have children with additional needs.

## *Conclusions*

The introduction of Papa Bear has been a fabulous experience within our ECI program, through working in Partnership with our families and team members we have addressed the restraints of a Monday to Friday program with more flexible T.I.L arrangements for team members. Many new friendships are developing within the playgroups and on family nights it is the Dads that are introducing each other to their families and children. We now have siblings attending our playgroup, this allows an opportunity for the Mothers to have the morning off!! Within this presentation I will share the comments from the Mothers and Fathers and show photos of the great times we are having together. PaPa Bear has enabled our E.C.I. programs to offer a genuinely more wholistic service in which all members of the family can be actively involved and benefit.

Final words from Samual as he woke his Dad

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You can be Daddy bear, I can be Baby Bear  
and Mummy can stay home and be Goldilocks!"*

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