

**OCCASIONAL PAPER No. 18
2006**

**The establishment of Parents'
Centre:**

**Successful advocacy for parents of children under
three by the Parents' Centre organisation in its
first decade 1952-1962**

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ISSN: 1174-1546
Occasional Paper Series No.18
[Series Editor: Carmen Dalli]

ISBN: 0-475-20076-4
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**THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PARENTS' CENTRE:
Successful advocacy for parents of children under three by the Parents'
Centre organisation in its first decade 1952 – 1962**

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the establishment of Parents' Centre and identifies the dynamics involved in this organisation from the perspectives of the pioneering women and men who remained involved in its development for the first decade of its history. Parents' Centre was set up to provide daytime ante-natal classes for pregnant women and parallel classes for expectant fathers mostly in the evenings. The classes included exercises for childbirth conducted by registered physiotherapists, and lectures on the conduct of childbirth by registered nurses or doctors. These were followed by post-natal classes during which the health of mothers was a focus, together with education about children's development from birth till three.

The focus of this paper is on the strategies used by Parents' Centre to found a successful organisation which could spread its message to parents, policy makers, the general public and professionals involved with young children. I argue that advocacy was a key factor in the organisation's success in spearheading change in the health and education services for young children and their parents.

This paper is based on data from my oral history interviews with 16 of the 17 pioneers of Parents' Centre. The pioneers were an emerging group of New Zealand professionals mostly trained in New Zealand in education, social work and health in the 1940s and 1950s. They included Helen and Quentin Brew, Chris Cole-Catley, Alice Fieldhouse, Ephra Garrett, Lex Grey, Helen Thornton, Jim Robb, Beverley Morris, Diana Mason, Ann Rosenberg, Mary Logan and myself: My voice is included in this paper as the author and analyst of the interview material. The interviews were conducted in 2001 as part of my doctoral study on

this topic (Bell, 2004). Additional data for this paper comes from the archives housed in the Institute for Early Childhood Studies at Victoria University of Wellington (Bell, 2004, Chapter 2).

Parents' Centre: The organisation in the context of the 50s

Parents' Centre is an organisation pioneered in New Zealand in 1952 by Helen Brew who made this claim in my interview with her: *'I started it all'*. She had been influenced by New Zealand psychiatrist Maurice Bevan-Brown from the time when, as a senior college pupil, she attended one of his lectures. In her interview Helen Brew referred many times to the impact of his words. She said: *'There I was in a gym-slip and I was hugely impressed'*. She learned more about his philosophy and its practical application when she trained first as a primary school teacher and, later, as a speech therapist. This connection, which Helen B often acknowledged, was supported and regarded as important by another participant in my study, Jim Robb, who was aware that *'There was a direct line from Bevan-Brown through to Helen Brew'*.

By the time Helen Brew heard Bevan-Brown speak, he had studied and worked in England for seventeen years. He had been a member of the staff of the Tavistock Institute Clinic which was 'based on the impetus of Freudian and related innovations after the First World War ...[and] offer[ed] treatment, training and research facilities in the field of neurosis, child guidance and groups in human relations' (Dicks, 1970). On his return to New Zealand in 1952, Bevan-Brown was concerned about the incidence of mental ill-health in this country. In his opinion, the way the birth of the child was handled was a vital factor in the achievement of emotional maturity which to him was synonymous with mental health. He believed that 'the conscious achievement of birth and its realisation sets the seal on emotional maturity' (Bevan-Brown, 1947, p.1).

Helen Brew found support for Bevan-Brown's ideas in her work with parents, particularly mothers in Hawke's Bay, where she worked as the first speech therapist. When she later had her own children she was astounded and dismayed at the way the hospital services failed to utilise the opportunities for providing

parents and children with a good start on the path to mental health. These experiences led her to study the teachings of Grantly Dick-Read whose book *Childbirth Without Fear* (1942) had become widely available in New Zealand in 1945 after World War II. Dick-Read promoted the idea that adequate knowledge and relaxation techniques would reduce pain in childbirth and make it a positive experience. This, he believed, would lay a sound foundation for the mother-child relationship. Beverley Morris, another of the Parents' Centre pioneers interviewed in this study, recalled that she '*was very impressed by the idea that tension through fear meant pain, so it was necessary to learn to relax*' (Bell 2004, p.148).

John Bowlby (1953) and Donald Winnicott (1949) were two other influential writers who had an involvement in the Tavistock Clinic and had a major influence on the pioneers of Parents' Centre. My interviews with them revealed beliefs about children which emphasised the need to consider every child's holistic development from the first days of life (Isaacs, S. 1930, 1932, 1933, 1938), especially the psychological aspects. These beliefs were at odds with the well-established and generally respected views of the policymakers of the 1950s about the care and education of young children and, in particular, about the management of childbirth and parenting (Bell, 2004, Chapter 5).

Prior to the establishment of Parents' Centre, most of the pioneers, particularly those working in education, had already been advocating and applying what they regarded as up-to-date and valid theories and practices in their professions and family lives. In their professional lives those working in education could be assured of some support for the implementation of their progressive ideas from policy makers, colleagues and friends (Ausubel, 1960; Bell, 2004, pp 140-154; Butchers, 1932; Campbell, 1938; Ewing, 1970). But in the health services there was not the same momentum, or sympathy, for change. The wide gap in philosophy between the education and health services, perhaps only vaguely perceived, assumed a shocking reality when the pioneers became consumers of the obstetric services. In the words of Helen Brew:

What happened when I had my first baby was horrendous...it was out of touch totally with the way my experience in life was up to that point. Just remembering some of it is quite a nightmare.

In attempting to apply progressive ideas to the education of children under three, the Parents' Centre pioneers challenged much of what had been regarded in New Zealand as the prerogative of the Plunket Society which until then was almost the only source of advice to parents on parent-child relationships, feeding, toilet training, and sleep management (King, 1913). Bryder (2003) gives the following description of the Plunket Society's way of operating:

Clinics were set up and nurses employed to monitor infant health and provide advice. Although the movement was medically inspired, in New Zealand's case principally by Dr Frederic Truby King (Chapman, 2003), it was generally organised and maintained by voluntary groups of women and run by nurses with little medical supervision. (Bryder, 2003, p.ix).

King's (1913) major emphasis was on the physical aspects of care. Although he believed that 'even development of mind and body is the surest foundation for adult health and happiness', almost all his advice centred on 'the formation of good and regular habits while young'. His doctrine, which he published in the book *Feeding and Care of Baby* (1913) was available also as a booklet *Baby's First Month* (1913) which was issued to all women after giving birth (May, 1997).

By the 1950s, some Plunket nurses such as Alice Fieldhouse, one of the Parents' Centre pioneers, were becoming less rigid in their advice. As Helen Brew observed:

I knew there was some part of the nursing fraternity who were gentle with mothers. I had one such, who alleviated the distress caused to my son by four hourly feeding with advice tailored to his needs.

Others, like Beverley Morris, had been working in isolation for change in the obstetric services after her own birth experiences. However, as the poet O'Shaughnessy, once put it: 'One man with a dream at leisure can go forth and conquer a crown, but three with a new song's measure, can trample an empire down'. It became obvious to the group who were to found Parents' Centre that an

organisation was needed to bring together a number of people who were dissatisfied with the existing system and who believed they could make a useful contribution to the education of parents. The opportunity came in response to a demand by women for ante-natal classes which could not only provide knowledge and specialised exercises that could allow women to play an active role in making the birth process a satisfying one, but also gave support to those willing and eager to step out of line.

In the following sections of this paper I first background the pioneers within their historical and personal life context and then identify the strategies the pioneers used to establish the organisation and to ensure that their advocacy for change was successful.

The Background of the Founders

The seventeen pioneers were a group of professionals and parents, most of whom were educated in a tradition regarded as ‘progressive’ at the time. As I noted in an earlier section, they had been able to implement their educational ideas as parents and professionals, albeit in a limited way even before they became involved in Parents’ Centre.

The pioneers came from families which were, in the main, loving, secure and stable. Almost all the pioneers reported good relationships with both their parents whom they remembered as playing major roles in their upbringing. The pioneers also described their parents as progressive to some degree in their disciplinary practices, as “ahead of their time’ and as people who valued education highly. At a time when economic circumstances in New Zealand made it difficult to keep children at school beyond the age of 14 (King, 2003), the families of the pioneers had ensured that their daughters, as well as their sons, had enough secondary education to qualify for acceptance in the tertiary training courses required for careers in education, health, social work and law.

All the seventeen pioneers took up the careers they trained for. Given the opportunities World War II provided, the women pioneers gained experience of leadership in their fields, both with children and parents, at an earlier stage in their careers than had previously been common for women (Edmond, 1986). With male teachers away at the war, many women were prevailed upon to take on positions as principals of rural schools or senior teachers in the city. In peace time, this early career advancement was usually the prerogative of men. The pioneers “seized the day” and gained valuable experience before they took time out to have children. Later on, this experience stood them in good stead and enabled them to speak with authority about the need for change in the services they encountered as they took on the challenges of parenthood. In their professional lives the pioneers had been in a good position to appreciate the strains on parents often caused by lack of knowledge about the importance of parents in early relationships and in child rearing. For example, when Helen Brew worked as a speech therapist in Hawkes Bay, she found, when talking to mothers, that there was often a connection between an unhappy birth experience and inability of the mother to form a close relationship with her child. Helen regarded a damaged relationship as a contributing factor to speech problems, particularly if the mother was rigid in following the Plunket routines that were dominant at the time.

After the war, some of the pioneers such as Diana Mason, Jim Robb, Ann Rosenberg and I were able to travel overseas for post-graduate study. These pioneers spoke about their study and experience as instrumental in forming their strong conviction that the foundations of mental health lay in the child rearing of the first three years. They also felt that their study and experience led them to believe that they should play a part in ensuring that parents and policy makers became aware of this view. They appreciated that prevention of problems was simpler and less costly than cure; therefore the services needed to change accordingly. Writers such as John Bowlby (1953), who had studied the backgrounds of children with problems, were making a convincing case for such changes. Through their work in sometimes different but related fields, the pioneers came to associate with like-minded people both locally and

internationally. Some of them had also become involved in other successful “consumer”¹ organisations, such as Playcentre and Family Planning. Through participation in these they came in contact with parents who were seeking help with childbirth and the rearing of children under three. Helen Brew recalled that after her first lecture to the Family Planning Association in 1951 on the need for change in the provision for childbirth, she was bombarded by women seeking information about methods they could use to influence change. As Helen Brew pointed out, they realised there was a constituency for change. It also became increasingly obvious that efforts as individuals were only of limited value and that an organization was necessary to provide a vehicle for change..

The Constituency for Change

The conviction of the pioneers that change was necessary was strengthened by a number of factors. New, more liberal ideas were influencing educational practice in playcentres, kindergartens and in school classes for children under eight years of age (Gardner, 1949). Concerns were often raised by women coming together in groups after childbirth in hospitals where they were forced/allowed to stay for 10-14 days. Many then joined Plunket Mothers’ clubs (Bryder, 2003), playcentres (Stover, 1998), kindergartens (Hughes, 1989) and the workplace and read papers and women’s magazines which were often on display there. These influences made some parents aware of the new ideas about the development and education of young children. My interviews with the pioneers such as Beverley Morris showed that a desire for change in the maternity services was being fostered by the books of Grantly Dick-Read and his disciples.

The liberal focus of courses in teacher training at Wellington Teachers’ College and Victoria University of Wellington in the 1940s and 1950s was also making an important contribution to change as these courses influenced the many young people required for the expanding teaching service. Many mature students, often

¹ I use the term “consumer” in full awareness that this may seem anachronistic for an organisation founded in the 50s. However, Parents’ Centre claimed this identity for itself in a submission to the Finlay Commission in 1959, a description that in itself clarifies the avant garde nature of this group of people. See footnote 2 for further information on the Finlay Commission.

parents, were also training or retraining after service overseas. As was evidenced by Parents' Centre pioneers such as Jim Robb (Bell 2004, p.44), Wellington became a fertile ground for practical action towards reform and a focus for a "consumer" voice.

Leadership style within Parents' Centre

Strong leadership was a crucial factor in the success of Parents' Centre (Bell, 2004, pp 140-170). While all the pioneers were leaders in their own fields before they became parents, they all believed that the leadership of Helen Brew was a crucial factor in the establishment and early success of Parents' Centre. Personally, I always regarded her as the mechanism which launched the Parents' Centre 'rocket' and all the pioneers I interviewed agreed that Helen had "extraordinary" leadership qualities.

Helen Brew was remembered by the pioneers as dynamic, unifying, energetic, effective and charismatic. Although some admitted they felt inadequate by comparison, the pioneers generally agreed that the organisation could not have taken root without her and she motivated them to become involved by her recognition and use of their skills. She was a good speaker, effective at getting her message across and able to endear herself particularly to women by sharing her own experiences, both of failure and of success. Chris Cole-Catley described Helen Brew's leadership in the following way:

Helen was the strength, the one determined to get things done. We owe her a very great deal. I'm just so immensely grateful for Parents' Centre and in particular Helen for starting it...She had an invincible belief in her own rightness. It just so happened that I agreed with it. She was a bit of a zealot. She could laugh at herself. We needed someone like her though. Her speaking ability was extremely good, with her acting. She was very well read. But we had to be, didn't we? She was able to find all the right sort of people to come into Parents' Centre. She never put anyone down. She could relate to those women. She did sometimes think the world revolved around her and was rather put out when you wouldn't drop things immediately to go and see her. She got huge support from Quentin [her husband]. He was a very special guy. (Chris Cole-Catley)

Helen Brew had learned the importance of gaining support for her leadership as a student and practitioner. She could even command it, at times, as she did in her experience as student president at Christchurch Training College. She recounted to me during the interview

I grabbed a couple of people on the stage and said 'Look you'd be an awfully good person to propose me' and he did!!! When I came out of the meeting I was totally overwhelmed by the support. I told them that I had to have everybody help me. And I needed everybody to work together. (Helen Brew)

The strength of her leadership is best illustrated through the voices of the pioneers themselves. They emphasised her ability as a speaker:

I listened to all these marvellous speakers including Helen Brew and got very excited. A lot of people (especially women) got a crush on Helen. She was very charismatic. I know I did. I got carried away when I first met her. (Mary Dobbie)

The main experience I had of Helen was in a drama group in Unity Theatre. That was when I had my three kids. I saw Helen first at Newtown Kindergarten Mothers' Club. She was beautiful and humorous, even though she spoke on a serious subject. I was aware she was having fights with the obstetricians and I appreciated what she was doing for women. (Beverley Morris)

She did wonderful things and she had these ideas that people grasped. My experience was that she often told stories from her own experience and her acting ability helped her to tell a very strong and memorable story. She was also very open about her feelings. (Barbara Hodge)

The Parents' Centre at Upper Hutt said "We'll run a meeting here and they asked Helen Brew to come. So we did this and of course she was extremely inspirational – very good about explaining what Parents' Centre was all about ...". (Helen Thornton)

Helen Brew [influenced me] she was totally committed ... she was amazing. (June Bastings)

Speaking as a pioneer myself, I can affirm all these statements. In addition, I would add my admiration at the amount of time and effort she put towards preparing submissions and speeches to ensure her facts could be supported, even though she was a mother of five children, one very young. She was assertive

enough to ask for help with child-minding and some, such as Nan Clayton, a Plunket nurse friend, often minded her children to free her for Parents' Centre work. Chris Cole-Catley, another Parents' Centre pioneer, documented Helen Brew's convictions, in a way which was well-researched, powerful and convincing. Helen had an outstanding ability to adapt her style to the people she was addressing, whether it was parents or world authorities. The quote below from the 1970s, demonstrates this point:

R.D. Laing came to New Zealand and by this time I had been working with mothers for years and before I even contacted him I did the right things. I wrote, I rang, I gave my background and somehow one of his people softened up a bit and said 'Well, my dear, you're not a doctor but we could give you five minutes. Would that be alright?' ... all that had to be said and I only had five minutes to say it in... I was trembling. I mean I was a good actress so I didn't fall apart. I put on a professional face that I really didn't have ... I told him all the key things, and I said, in a few sentences, what we had been doing. (Helen Brew)

Helen Brew had the ability to form close relationships with those who had power and influence, such as Bowlby and Winnicott, and was often able to persuade them to be of assistance to Parents' Centres. An example of this was Laing's cooperation in making the film 'Birth with R.D. Laing':

This man was a god in this area. There was no question. The genuine article. He was really an international figure and he was in my house. Suddenly I've got this god with me and nobody doubts this RD Laing. He had been in the papers so often. He said 'I will reach you in London and we'll make a film together ... well that just turned it totally around. (Helen Brew)

Her ability to avoid confrontation and irritation and to put leaders in the field at ease was important. It was clear from my interviews with the pioneers that the personal and professional qualities of Helen Brew were a crucial factor in the success of the organisation.

Helen Brew's leadership style was not the only factor, however, in the success of Parents' Centre. If Helen Brew provided the mechanism that launched the "rocket" the other pioneers were the crew that kept it on course. They too had leadership skills which they used in various ways in the Parents' Centre

organisation. They presented role models of people who were ready to support and defend their beliefs with sound arguments and without becoming defensive. In most cases these qualities had been firmly set in place from childhood and built on later in their careers. Most too had a good sense of humour and the ability to laugh at themselves, qualities which in my experience of conducting classes for coping with stress are useful strategies.

The following quotes from the pioneers support my analysis of the personal qualities which were important elements of the leadership style in the early days of Parents' Centre.

We always regarded ourselves as being at the forefront of liberal thought in Wellington ... We were both [she and her husband] voracious readers ... I had liberal ideas about how babies should be with their mothers at all times. (Diana Mason)

I had confidence in myself. (June Bastings)

I was of good intelligence and did well in subjects that girls generally did not – science and Latin. (Alice Fieldhouse)

I suppose I saw myself as a strong woman ... I was strong in my feelings about the right care of children. (Ephra Garrett)

I am open to ideas ... an enthusiastic person. (Barbara Hodge)

I was really into social issues such as family planning and abortion. A lot of women suffered back then. (Mary Dobbie)

I really class myself as a Peter Pan because I really like to play and I can't help being spontaneous and working with my hands. (Beverley Morris)

I felt very sorry for mothers ... I had been a midwife myself ... I felt that although the letter of the law was being observed, the spirit of it was not. Women were not being treated as people, but as machines producing babies. (Mary Logan)

I'm very lucky that I've greatly enjoyed life. I had no limitations ... I just took for granted that I had all these opportunities ... I was very lucky to have met a lot of people and I was very curious ... I've always considered myself a feminist, even before the word was really used. (Chris Cole-Catley)

Self confidence, good intelligence, strength, openness to ideas, enjoyment of life and awareness of social issues, concern for women, children and those less fortunate, were all qualities which the pioneers brought to their work in Parents' Centre. When they applied those qualities to the realities of the system for childbirth and early parenthood through personal experience they were further motivated to help and effect change. Helen Brew expressed their feelings well when she said in my interview with her:

'I couldn't hide and say "It is a pity" and carry on and just get on with it ...while I was saying in my mind "Let's just forget all this", there were all these women coming to the door'.

It became obvious that education about the issues would be a key factor for those seeking an opportunity to effect change. After many meetings and discussions, the pioneers identified their goals which were then expressed in the first Parents' Centre Bulletin: The first was to provide 'a comprehensive educational programme to help equip parents for their demanding, but rewarding, role'. A second task was to build the understanding necessary to replace in the minds of parents and those close to them, misunderstandings and anxieties which had become an essential part of their belief system. The third was to build enough confidence in Parents' Centre members, for them to become part of a constituency for change, through transmission of their ideas to others, such as family members, neighbours, members of organisations they belonged to, and the service providers. The final task was to equip some members for leadership in Parents' Centre and in effective campaigns to change community services (*PCB No.1, July 1954, p.1*).

A Consumer Organisation

My interview with Diana Mason, one of the Parents' Centre pioneers, emphasised the "consumer organisation" aspect of Parents' Centre as an important feature of its success.

At the time of our interview, Diana Mason still believed that an organisation which gave voice and power to consumers was the most effective way of helping people to assimilate the new ideas and enthusing them to convince others:

It was consumer oriented. I felt that women firmly believed that it [Parents' Centre teaching] was going to achieve greater harmony between parents and children and therefore they believed in it to start with. (Diana Mason)

Initially, Parents' Centre was forced into becoming a consumer organisation because the consumers were the only people available, and willing, to undertake the task. As the organisation developed, members came to realise the strengths of that model. The organisation could be tailored to the needs of New Zealand parents and dedicated to empowering them so they could feel confident and knowledgeable enough to press for change and not be dissuaded by the inevitable challenges to their beliefs:

I felt that as far as I was concerned it was taken over by the women themselves, who were pregnant. Women demanding to be treated as equals. Women saying 'This is what I want to happen with such and such ...' and I think that's a very good move'. (Diana Mason)

We didn't feel that somebody else should be doing it. We did it because we knew it had to be done. (Jim Robb)

Members could have a role in ensuring that change was based on their own needs, knowledge and experience. They realised, however, that the convictions of a few would not necessarily be enough to convince policy makers. To be effective they had to enlarge the constituency for change by building supportive and knowledgeable consumer power.

Justification for staying with, and building up, the consumer model was expressed forcefully by Mary Logan, Diana Mason and Jim Robb:

Parents' Centre was effecting change from within ... it was a consumer group working to get change for themselves and people like them. (Mary Logan)

Strategies had to be considered carefully. They had to be weighed up against the goals of the proposed organisation and the stage of readiness of the possible constituency.

The voluntary component of the organisation

The pioneers recognised that the voluntary component of the organisation, a necessity at first, if empowered and knowledgeable, could be another important change agent. In her submission to the Finlay Commission (1959) Helen Brew said:

We feel that we do not need to elaborate upon the economic advantages of making use of voluntary effort. A hundred pounds collected by a voluntary society itself, or granted to it by a trust or government, can do the work of a much larger sum directly spent by a Department whose salary and administrative costs are so much higher. (Brew, in Parents' Centre submission to Finlay Commission, 1949, p.31)

The female pioneers could work as volunteers in the 1950s and 1960s because they were supported by their husbands. That was the traditional pattern at least among middle-class women. Some, like myself, worked a few hours a week in paid employment, often in response to invitations. This freedom from full-time work gave some women leisure to pursue interests such as Parents' Centre, which made them feel they were using their skills for a good purpose as well as continuing to develop them. With its provision for children, the organisation provided the opportunity for volunteers taking time out from careers to play a meaningful role in the community and to keep alive the skills they had learned.

Apart from the financial considerations noted already by Helen Brew to the Finlay Commission, volunteers in Parents' Centre provided a valuable counter-balance to any professional view as they were free to be as innovative and radical (for their times) as they liked. In her submissions to the Finlay Consultative Committee, 1959, Helen Brew expressed the conviction that *'some of the deficiencies which the present committee [the Finlay] has been set up to examine exist precisely because of this failure to obtain the parents' views.'* (Brew, 1959, Introduction).

The use of volunteers contributed to bridging the gap between 'teacher' and 'taught'. Most of the teachers within Parents' Centre were dealing with the same

practical situations as the other class members and applying the practices they were promoting. All members who wished to, could be involved as they could contribute in many ways. This helped to make them feel included: part of a supportive group. Members not only led classes; they also carried out class organisation and were encouraged to play an active, though low-key and sensitive role, in helping people to relate in tea breaks and on other informal occasions. This practice helped people to feel comfortable in contributing to discussion and exchanging ideas. The fact that the leaders were bringing up small children, gave them a rapport with class-members and much learning occurred outside set class times:

I got a lot of tips from mothers. I felt this was at least as useful as some of the lectures were, talking amongst ourselves ... we would talk about things, ... you do get pretty wound up in your own pregnancies and so sometimes it was good to have other people listen to you and to listen to. (June Bastings)

I learned that the mistakes we made weren't made with ill intent. We all learned from each other. (Chris Cole Catley)

The voluntary component kept leaders in touch with the opinions and needs of parents so that what they were advocating was realistic and not too far ahead of what most parents wanted. For example, when Parents' Centre promoted rooming-in of the baby with the mother, they did this with the qualifier that this should only happen if the mother wanted it: This was a direct response to what mothers said. Feedback from members was considered crucial in preserving the consumer aspect of the organisation. Leaders were trained not to become defensive when members provided a negative type of feedback and to encourage and support critics as well as those who made positive comments.

Networking

Networking with agencies of a similar philosophy, strengthened and increased the constituency advocating change. Networking often involved the pioneers in training in groups, such as Playcentre, student training for nursing, teaching and social work, Marriage Guidance, the Family Planning Association and the

Workers Educational Association. Helen Brew emphasised this in her submission to the Finlay Commission (1959).

Thousands of young mothers and fathers have expressed their views, aired their worries, and received much help and encouragement during lecture discussions conducted by Parents' Centre leaders at the invitation of such groups as Plunket Mothers' Clubs, Kindergarten Associations, Parent-teacher groups etc.(p. 8)

Jim Robb also emphasised this point:

There was an overlap in my activities. I showed the Robertsons' film to trainees in Marriage Guidance and some Parents' Centre members turned up, as Marriage Guidance trainees, e.g. David and Hazel Ross were involved in the training. Lots of things were going on. There was a rush of interest in regard to the mental health area. Lots of associations were set up. We kept meeting the same people at meetings, such as Wallis Ironside and a number of others. I met Bevan-Brown and knew the Cooks quite well. I had heard about them at Tavistock – I had been there.

This sharing of resources for training spread the objectives of Parents' Centre to a wide range of people in the community and often promoted sympathy for the organisation and its goals. The networks proved important in identifying and finding professional people such as doctors, nurses and physiotherapists who were sympathetic to Parents' Centre ideals, at least in some degree. They could recognise there was a 'critical mass' (Swain, D. 2004, personal communication about thesis) in the community becoming sympathetic to change. Parents' Centre leaders sought and kept the cooperation of these people by treating their views with respect, inviting them to leadership training courses and demonstrating appreciation of the constraints on them as professionals, as the following quote from Helen Thornton demonstrated.

We did always try to cooperate with the professionals, the Plunket nurses and the nurses in the hospitals. We didn't try to antagonise them because what we felt we needed to do was keep them on side, to keep the whole thing going properly ... Sister M, although she was quite difficult to get on with, was very helpful and really did allow us to use their facilities and bring people in for night classes there ... we wouldn't be extreme. Our physio didn't want us to be extreme. She was a rigid physio, who believed in what she was doing and did it, and was bound by her ethics. (Helen Thornton)

The knowledge the pioneers had obtained about childbirth and parenthood and their ability to use good strategies for communication, enabled them to get

cooperation from people who had, at first, only a modicum of support for the Parents' Centre ideas, as Helen Thornton indicated here:

We visited all the doctors and most of them were a bit apathetic. But Denis Heginbotham was not. He was really keen. He wanted to go ahead and he, I suppose, pressured his fellow doctors into saying that all mothers must go [to Parents' Centre classes]. He really did make the effort to get his other doctors behind him. With a small community it's not so difficult. Denis Heginbotham gave a talk to the fathers but he still wouldn't have fathers in the delivery room. He fought that one right to the last minute. We respected Denis. He was only a young obstetrician. He had only just qualified as an obstetrician and he had a husband in with a birth that had been disastrous. The father had been a 'real pain' and that had put him off completely. He couldn't see past it and rather than make a fuss and antagonise him, we said 'all right, we respect your ideas and you respect ours!'. He was really very good about it. That was just his one block.
(Helen Thornton)

Belief in the advantages of the Parents' Centre way was shared. Some of the pioneers offered their services on a voluntary basis to other organisations, such as Wellington Teachers' Training College. Members such as Mary Logan, Alice Fieldhouse, Helen and Quentin Brew and I gave lectures on birth, which were seen as a necessary part of the child development course, though there were few College staff, confident or knowledgeable enough to present them. Thus they filled a gap and often gained support at the time for Parents' Centre. There was a double advantage in that. When the students became parents they sought out Parents' Centre classes and used their skills to support and promote the organisation by serving on committees and as class leaders.

On a practical level, networking also reduced the costs of equipment, advertising and payment to specialists who could provide knowledge, additional to that which Parents' Centre leaders could contribute. The interchange of ideas on training and ways of dealing with problems had a particular value because the clientele of these groups had similar backgrounds but a slightly different perspective. Thus, the group interested in change and ready to contribute became increasingly wider.

Helen Thornton recalled the cooperation between groups:

The Playcentre provided a jumping-off stage and the Parents' Centre provided a hall, a crèche, a room for us to have meetings [in the Maternity

Hospital, through the cooperation of the matron] ... *and of course we had tremendous help from University Extension* [where Beverley Morris later worked].

This mutual assistance reduced the amount of time and energy the volunteers had to spend on money raising, although a certain amount was necessary. The endorsement of compatible organisations helped to give the movement credibility, validity and a 'liberal' rather than a 'radical' aura. The involvement of University lecturers gave the organisation respectability in the eyes of many attending classes and helped them to accept and understand the progressive educational principles on which the courses were based. Parents' Centre thus gained from the networks of liberal thinking in other organisations and contributed to them, as this quote from Jim Robb demonstrated:

The University encouraged its staff to get out and do things in the community and so if you were getting out and doing things, taking time off work and doing things related to working, it had a value. So there was no problem about doing that. I was doing things, which, on the face of it, were valuable and tied in with my work. I could regard the people in Parents' Centre as being from the same points of view particularly with Quentin, as colleagues. A lot of Parents' Centre people, especially new members, were part of my general constituency of students...As time went on and as I got to know the people better – I'd never met Quentin before, or Helen – they became a group of people I knew well and liked working with and I became good friends with David and Hazel Ross. David was responsible for introducing me to Quentin. Both were in psychological services. David and I trained together. Both of us were best men at each other's weddings. We had a long contact. We were at Teachers College in 1940, 41. (Jim Robb)

The classes

The leadership qualities I described earlier had an important role in the success of the Parents' Centre classes. The pioneers worked to convey the progressive ideas they cherished and which they believed they needed to demonstrate, not only for the benefit of class members, but also as a way of training future leaders.

Ephra Garrett, another Parents' Centre pioneer, attested to this in her interview:

I was so sure we were right... I was strong in my feelings that I was right in the care of my children.

Their strong belief in their basic principles and their success in practising them made the pioneers very convincing. The certainty in their beliefs stood them in good stead when questions were asked and ideas challenged especially by well-respected professionals, such as obstetricians and Health Department officials.

The leaders, especially Helen Brew, conveyed this message in no uncertain terms to class members, as June Bastings recalled:

Helen Brew ... she had no doubts about anything.

The pioneers supported their views by reference to the work of the 'Gurus of Parents' Centre' such as Grantly Dick-Read, John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott (Bell, 2004). Their certainty helped them to put their energy into promoting practices which they believed were well supported by research and had proved effective when they applied them in their work and family lives. It also gave confidence to parents:

Total insight came when you met the parents [of children with speech problems] who were very nervous and often ashamed their child couldn't talk properly. (Helen Brew)

I didn't have any difficulty with any of them really [her children]. I was so sure we were right. Of course we were right and we knew it, because we were all so much happier. It wasn't that I was unhappy before but I did feel guilty with the four-hourly feeding. She [Helen Brew] had an invincible belief in her own rightness. It just so happened that I agreed with it. (Chris Cole-Catley)

The pioneers however, were not generally a group who could be called 'closed minded'. If they showed such a tendency, many class members were strong enough to challenge them openly in discussion or in written feedback. As June Bastings said:

If people such as Helen Brew became dogmatic, there were usually others strong enough to challenge her ideas.

Barbara Hodge expressed a similar view in a different way:

There was only a right way; there was no choice [according to Helen Brew]. That was ok. I had enough wits to know there was always a choice.

I can recall from attendance at a training session led by one of Parents' Centre's educational advisers on training, Crawford Somerset, that there was an emphasis on warning leaders against an authoritarian approach and an appeal to them to stay open-minded. The format of the classes was considered crucial as the pioneers believed not only in advocating, but in demonstrating progressive methods of teaching. In this way, they hoped to ensure class members felt welcomed, included and appreciated and would in turn ensure the same happened when they in turn became leaders: *'It was inclusive'* said June Bastings.

My own personal memory is that the pioneers thought carefully about the way they would present the opening sessions of courses and the image they wanted to convey. Ann Rosenberg and Helen Thornton spoke about what the leaders saw as the ideal, in the following statements from their interviews:

A class leader was a powerful and warm person who didn't force anything. She set the scene for the classes (Ann Rosenberg).

You were delighted that they were pregnant, you were delighted that they were in your class and wanted to get involved [and it was important to demonstrate that]. (Helen Thornton)

The leaders realised that the setting for classes was important and tried to present a friendly alternative to the school model, as Mary Dobbie explained:

One of the first things I would do, was rearrange the chairs in a circle and try and get the discussion going.

Although it is a simple technique, the arrangement of chairs in a circle so that people can see each other and pick up reactions shown in body language, is one I found valuable in involving participants in Parents' Centre. Later, as a leader at in-service courses run by the Training Division of the Department of Education I used the same technique irrespective of the type of trainee. Group members ranged from students to those in authority, such as school principals and inspectors. I found that in many situations, men found this arrangement difficult to handle and would create a challenge for me, as leader, by sitting side-on, and forming second rows or sub-groups. I have rarely found this technique a problem

with early childhood workers who are mainly women. They appear to welcome, rather than be challenged by, the in-depth discussions this technique tends to promote.

Class leaders tried to cater for a range of learning styles. They found that the format of lectures followed by discussion groups was a successful way of giving parents the information they needed. They realised that all parents had some knowledge of childbirth and childrearing from a variety of sources and it was important not to appear patronizing by assuming class members were ignorant. Class members usually came with a component of anxiety, even fear, mixed with unreal expectations in their concepts of childbirth. For many, more liberal child rearing conjured up images of spoilt children. As June Bastings remembered '*You do get pretty wound up in your own pregnancies and so sometimes it was good to have other people listen to you and to listen to*'. It was important that leaders could bring the knowledge class members had already acquired into the open, help them to look at it critically and apply what they felt comfortable with. This, the pioneers believed, was education in the progressive tradition as it could meet individual needs, tap into the wealth of knowledge and concern in the group, and build self esteem. They tried to convey the message that everyone's contribution was valuable. This method would have been in marked contrast to the form of education most class members had received in their school lives. Some welcomed it. Others found the lack of criticism and judgement of alternative views quite threatening and needed assurance that it was a valuable educational technique. Jim Robb, Beverley Morris and Ann Rosenberg recalled that they could use the strategies they applied in their professional life in Parents' Centre classes. So class members were benefiting from what were considered the best of teaching techniques at the time:

Parents' Centre meant to me, initially, a strange organisation I'd never heard of before, which seemed to be doing things I found quite attractive, from the point of view of my personal and professional reference...I was involved in Tavistock using small groups and training sessions. The technique was developed at Tavistock by a psychologist ... He got them together. He'd come in and sit there. They'd try and get him to take over. He refused and interpreted to them what they were doing and what they wanted him to do. I used it as a resource device, in the 60s. (Jim Robb)

I was already using the method of giving the people the questions and asking them what they thought. Then I would put it back to them (Beverley Morris).

I learned interactive stuff, in the course in Manchester. That built on what I had learned at Victoria, in classes at advanced level, which were usually small. (Ann Rosenberg)

Being non-threatening to class members was something leaders discussed frequently, as Barbara Hodge recalled from her days as a class member:

I never heard any expressions of dissatisfaction. But we were in discussion groups afterwards. I think they were successful because of the very casual way in which they were held. There was never any formal signing in. You could come and go as you felt like it and there was an acceptance of everyone.

A strength of discussion groups was the fact that group leaders had all had recent experience of childbirth and parenthood and were of a similar age to class members. The men who led classes, such as Quentin Brew and Jim Robb, had participated with their wives in childbirth and childrearing. This gave them credibility and enabled them to talk from the heart as well as the head about a technique which gave them a bond with members. Helen Brew observed:

The fact that the leaders had coped with similar situations to those of their group members gave them an ability to empathise.

Practical provisions to meet the needs of parents

The pioneers aimed to make ante-natal education classes as enjoyable and stress-free as possible. They seem to have succeeded, at least in Wellington, where it was reported that 'discussion techniques are now used. They have proved so successful that it is often difficult to get the mothers to go home' (PCB, No.13, June 1959, p.13). Course planners always allowed for an amount of unstructured time where mothers could relate to each other and the tutors over a cup of tea, browse in the library, or seek clarification, one-on-one with leaders. Where possible, a creche was provided during classes. This proved a valuable resource for mothers as attendance was flexible and if children became upset they were accommodated in the classes. The playgroup organised around the classes usually

allowed mothers with children to attend and concentrate on the lecture-discussions, free from the distraction of children. ‘Second-time’ mothers in classes were usually a valuable resource for tutors and class-members because they were seen as “having experience”. They had often tried the ideas Parents’ Centre advocated and had relevant questions and comments. Their relationships with their children were usually noted with interest.

One of the changes that Parents’ Centre brought about was the encouragement of fathers at classes, particularly when the birth process was the topic. This was revolutionary in the context of its time. Chris Cole-Catley explained Parents’ Centre’s commitment that the organisation be seen as something for both parents, not just women:

Someone suggested that we call Parents’ Centre the ‘Mothers’ Something’, but I said right from the very beginning, and I’m sure Helen thought so too, that it must be a Parents’ Centre ... the word ‘Centre’, was modelled on the Playcentre organisation.

The pioneers planned to provide the conditions which would enable fathers to be present and feel comfortable. June Bastings remembered the success of these provisions:

We were all friends and we would talk about things and our husbands would come to lectures sometimes.

Speaking from my own experience of being involved in course planning for Wellington Parents’ Centre between 1959 and 1963, I vividly recall that in each course, two or three lectures were held at night to enable couples to attend. In these sessions fathers were given the message that they could be useful – not merely bystanders. This too was recalled by Chris Cole-Catley:

The father also had an active part to play – rubbing her [his wife’s] back, keeping her up with the breathing and generally encouraging – very important, if the nurses were busy.

Men were given an overview of the birth process, with usually a film on birth and practical ways of helping their wives in labour. The lectures on child management and the role of the father were, as far as possible, given by men.

Quentin Brew's contribution was always appreciated. Those who were already fathers were encouraged to talk about their experiences to prospective fathers. Men also played a part in committee work, not usually in the prestigious role of president, but in supportive, specialised roles such as treasurer, or legal adviser. Their involvement facilitated networking with politicians and policy makers who were nearly all men. Lectures geared towards the role of the father in classes, gave men a new perspective and, in many cases, led them to support the organisation. This was also an important way of avoiding stress in the marital relationship by enabling the couple to work together and understand each others' views.

Building knowledge in the constituency by sharing books and research

'We had a very good library right from the start' (Chris Cole-Catley).

The library was seen as a vital resource and was appreciated and well used by class members, many of whom were avid readers:

I found all the readings very good and the library was good. It made an enormous difference to me, to find all this positive stuff about mothering and family life. All this empowerment, in saying that mother wasn't just a cook and bottle washer, but she was responsible for the household and I thought this was so important. (Mary Logan)

I really appreciated the library in Parents' Centre, because you didn't have to search for the sort of books that interested you, at that particular time ... so that's where I started reading of what was happening and what was to come. It was great to get that preparation. (Mary Mowbray)

When the Parents' Centre library started up and people recommended books, I read everything I could on the subject. (June Bastings)

The library was important. It was very focused. People in the classes used it. (Helen Thornton)

The provision of relevant books was a strength as they were nearly all by overseas authors and not easy to obtain in New Zealand public libraries. The economic policy of the 1950s restricted the importation of books (Sutch, 1966). The prevailing social climate was so closed to discussion of anything to do with sex and reproduction, that many women would have found it hard to ask for such books in shops and public libraries even if they had been in stock or affordable.

Books on specialist subjects were particularly expensive. An additional strategy to help parents access relevant books was the inclusion of regular book reviews in the *Parents' Centres Bulletin*. Furthermore, lists of suitable books for centres were updated by the Parents' Centre Federation and sent to different centres, with costs included to encourage committees to keep their libraries up to date.

The use of the media: Taking the message to the public

Whenever possible the pioneers used the media to publicise their philosophy and its practical application. This was done in as many innovative ways as the combined expertise of the pioneers could provide. Material on Parents' Centre celebrations such as anniversaries, was sent, usually with photographs, to local papers. Chris Cole-Catley with her skills as a journalist and connections in the press, played a major role in this publicising Parents' Centre events and Helen Brew's views. Helen Brew herself talked about the fact that '*The Christchurch Press were most supportive*' and Chris Cole-Catley and other members often received coverage in radio. Quentin Brew hosted a programme on radio. Parents were invited to send in questions.

A novel departure from normal practice in gaining publicity, was the production of the revue *Mum's the Word* in Wellington (*PCB*, No.12, December 1958, p.3). Chris Cole-Catley wrote 'Mum's the Word' which followed four sets of prospective parents, first in a doctor's waiting room and then in the reception hall and ward of the "Peachaven Maternity Home'. On the occasion of the public performance, Helen Brew used the positive and sympathetic audience reaction to good effect, when in a short curtain speech, as Federation President, she emphasised the aims of Parents' Centre. This production proved to be an effective way of getting the Parents' Centre message across to the Wellington public. The organisers had used their influence to ensure that some policy makers were present and asked to speak. The Parents' Centre Bulletin reported the event in this way:

Warm and perceptive tributes to the work of Parents' Centres were paid at the close of the revue which marked the opening of the annual conference, by the Prime Minister, Mr Nash, the former Minister of Health, Mr Marshall, and the Mayor of Wellington, Mr Kitts. (PCB, No.12, 1958, p.3)

Another effective way of publicising the work of Parents' Centre and building a constituency for change among the general public, was by accepting invitations to speak at gatherings of parents, in organisations which were well established but outside the areas of concern of Parents' Centre. One example is noted in *PCB*, (No.12, December 1958):

Links between Parents' Centre and the Salvation Army were forged in 1958 when Helen Brew addressed a session of the Salvation Army Congress in Palmerston North as Federation president, on 'Building Parent-Child relationships.

A further effective strategy was the use of 'activist tactics' in the conduct of three major campaigns in the first ten years of Parents' Centre's existence. The campaigns were firstly to advance the case for reform in childbirth, secondly to advance the case of fathers' support in childbirth and thirdly to advocate for allowing parents to stay with their young children in hospital.

In each campaign, a group of Parents' Centre activists, skilled in capturing media attention, triggered and orchestrated a whole package of concerns. The first campaign was led by Helen Brew, ably assisted by Chris Cole-Catley'. Chris had exclusive expertise in using the media and this, combined with the drama skills of Parents' Centre supporters such as Bruce Mason, Tim Elliot, Pat Evison and Margaret McLuskie, greatly aided Helen Brew's campaign.

The second campaign was led by Quentin Brew and Alice Fieldhouse who held public meetings and organised petitions to the Hospital Board and articles in the press, to advance the cause of fathers' support in childbirth. Later Helen Brew, Alice Fieldhouse and others used the media to press the case for allowing parents

to stay with their young children in hospital and to support Betty Campbell's election to the Wellington Hospital Board, a position which enabled her to influence change from within. These three campaigns not only proved successful but they made the public familiar with Parents' Centre and boosted recruitment to the classes.

Direct advocacy with politicians and policy makers

From the beginning, Parents' Centre leaders avoided alignment with any one political party but used opportunities to influence individual politicians and policy makers. Dame Hilda Ross (McCallum, 1993), a National Party member, took a strong stand to support the organisation to obtain funding in 1956, against the advice of the Health Department. Walter Nash, Labour prime minister in 1957 'had been a friend to Parents' Centre' (Dobbie, 1990, p.45) and attended and spoke supportively at the performance of the production 'Mum's the Word' in Wellington in 1956. A local MP, Dan Riddiford, joined Parents' Centre with his wife Yvonne and became so supportive that he introduced Parents' Centre ideas to members of his party and paved the way for direct submissions.

Later Parents' Centre members also felt empowered enough to make submissions to public enquiries such as the Finlay Commission 1959² and the Currie Commission³ and were able to present, substantiate and argue their ideas for change to leaders in health, in education and in government.

² 'The Consultative Committee on Infant and Preschool Health Services was set up by the Minister of Health in 1959 to investigate and advise on New Zealand's preschool health services targeting the Plunket Society whose Karitane hospitals were an increasing charge on the Health Department. The threat of a Government takeover of Plunket, or its slow attrition through loss of Health Department support, could be seen only as a threat to the principle of voluntary service, and to the funding of all such services. For this principle the Parents' Centres, Playcentres, Free Kindergartens, other groups and community-minded individuals were prepared to pull out all stops' (Dobbie, 1990, p.59).

³ The Currie Commission, 1960, was 'an independent survey of the effects of educational policy and practice over the past two decades', p.193. Beeby CE, 1992. The Biography of an Idea, NZCER Wellington.

Group Support

I cannot emphasise enough the power of the group support offered by Parents' Centre. It helped parents, particularly mothers, to regain self esteem, after what, at the time were experiences which challenged not only their right to make a case but also their knowledge and experience. I personally recall the impact of this during my appearance with Hazel Ross, a Parents' Centre leader from Palmerston North, at the Finlay Commission in 1959. At the time we were speaking to a submission in which we reported on evidence provided by large numbers of women that relationships with Plunket nurses were authoritarian. We argued that this relationship was unhelpful. One of the older men on the Commission silenced our submission with the statement that 'Plunket nurses are wonderful', a fact which we were not disputing. We felt demeaned by this interruption but recovered afterwards as we shared the experience with other members and used humour to help us regain our equilibrium and confidence.

In concluding my oral history interview with each pioneer, I asked how they felt about the role they had played within Parents' Centre. , As a group, the pioneers were convinced that they had played an important role in advocating for change to the services for childbirth. But they would never claim they did it alone. Instead, they acknowledged the power of the group which enabled them to pool their skills, knowledge, experience and strategies to good effect, at the right time and wherever an opportunity presented itself. What started as a way of providing ante-natal classes in the Grantly Dick-Read method for women demanding the service, led to the establishment of an organisation which gave parents a consumer voice and an effective lobby for change in the services for themselves and particularly their children under three.

Conclusion and a note about the future

In 1952 the Parents' Centre pioneers defined a need for the incorporation of progressive practices into the education of children from the beginning of life. In response, they chose to launch an organisation, Parents' Centre, based on a consumer model and worked within it as volunteers. That model proved to be

effective because it provided a way of educating, convincing, involving and empowering parents in building a constituency which could put pressure on policy makers and service providers to adapt to their progressive ideas. Through the classes, the networks, media publicity and the *Parents' Centres Bulletin*, the pioneers inspired and enabled others with similar beliefs to play a part in changing the attitudes of parents and those responsible for the services. The support the pioneers built up among parents and professionals in health and education, enabled them to put effective pressure on policy makers, to change the health and early education services for the benefit of all. These strategies enabled the pioneers to meet their objectives and also made a significant contribution towards the promotion and support of progressive education, particularly for children under three.

The Parents' Centre pioneers had developed leadership capability and knowledge of successful strategies for improving parenting which they applied in the Parents' Centre organisation. They believed that the success of the organisation, as well as that of the parents who belonged, was reliant on the need for leaders to build confidence and self-esteem in members. The leaders organised parent classes in such a way that some members at least could feel valued and confident enough to become leaders themselves. To support those within the movement, and to spread the message among the general public, they used the strengths of the people who were attracted to the organisation. These included competent writers, speakers, teachers and dramatists who were prepared to publicise the cause and contribute to campaigns to effect change. All these strategies made Parents' Centre an effective organisation in promoting its thrust for change and 'moving and shaking' the existing systems for childbirth and parenthood in the 1950s.

When the pioneers were interviewed for the last time in 2002, for my thesis, they still found the Parents' Centre philosophy a sound one. The philosophy was one forged at a time when happiness was regarded as an ideal and a criterion of success in the upbringing of children. In 2002, the pioneers still considered that the liberal practices they advocated for parents and children under three in the

1950s have been tried and have stood the test of time for families in contemporary New Zealand. They also believed that the methods of advocacy they used remain effective. These include recognition and understanding of a community need in combination with leadership, which is strong, supportive, knowledgeable, effective and capable of uniting the constituency for change. A lesson that the pioneers remained mindful of was that to remain effective, leaders must keep in constant touch with their constituency, use networks and appreciate the need to join the ranks of politicians and policy makers. Every opportunity, wherever it occurs, needs to be taken.

Looking back at Parents' Centre philosophy now, in 2006, it is interesting to speculate on the future. Suzanne Moore, mother and journalist writing in the *New Statesman* in April 2004 argued that the goal of parenting in the 21st Century was not happiness but educational success. I see signs of this in New Zealand too: and I see that such a change could present a challenge to Parents' Centre's objectives. Changes in the role of women, particularly when they become parents, has necessarily changed the Parents' Centre organisation: it is finding it harder to remain a fully voluntary organisation. Furthermore, as women take their place alongside men in politics, and the hospital and obstetric management on District Health Boards, advisory committees and early childhood community services, they have both less time to devote to voluntary organisations and more opportunity to express their concerns directly to those who have the power to effect change, or to be change agents themselves. If the present Parents' Centre leaders believe they can still make an effective contribution to mental health, still a great concern for all (including the white middle class) they may need to bend their effort towards making a case for funding and support rather than on education for childbirth per se. A study of the original goals, experiences and practices of the pioneers could perhaps be helpful in determining the direction of new family support services. Research, which was such an important feature and support in the first ten years of Parents' Centre, may again need to be used to address the questions of particular relevance today.

Whether a group of well qualified parents is available, or necessarily the most effective, to advocate successfully in 2005, however, has become a question for debate.

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