

Social Workers in Early Childhood Education Outcomes Evaluation

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Conflict of Interest Declaration

Presbyterian Support Northern has designed and run the SWiECE service and this evaluation report has been conducted by the Presbyterian Support Northern Research & Evaluation Unit.

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Social Workers in ECE Evaluation Report

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Acronyms & Definitions

ECE - Early Childhood Education

Kaitakawaenga - A go-between position that is responsible for maintaining relationships with iwi, hapū and hapori Māori

Koha - The custom of gifting, offering, donating or contributing. This can include animate and inanimate objects.

Mana - To have mana is to have great pride, authority and presence. This can be inherent or it can be passed down/bestowed by Iwi.

MSD - Ministry of Social Development

OT - Oranga Tamariki

SWiECE - Social Worker in Early Childhood Education

Whānau - Whānau speaks to the extended nature of family and therefore includes those who are not necessarily related by blood and those who may have passed.

WINZ - Work and Income New Zealand



Section 1

Introduction

1.1 Early Intervention in New Zealand

The New Zealand government has a number of services and programmes in place to support families raising young children in New Zealand. The Ministry of Education funds services and programmes to support young children's social, emotional and academic development. These include early intervention teachers, education support workers, Kaitakawaenga cultural advisors, psychologists and speech language therapists (Ministry of Education, 2019).

Most services that support whānau with social challenges are delivered by Oranga Tamariki, whose total budget for prevention and early and intensive intervention services in June 2020 was \$177 million. Oranga Tamariki run Family Start, a flagship home-visiting programme for pregnant mothers, and family and whānau with infants and children up to three years old who are identified as “at-risk”. This service can support children up to five on a needs basis. Oranga Tamariki also partner with providers across New Zealand to run Social Workers in Schools (SWiS): a primary school-based, community social work service, provided in about 700 primary and intermediate schools (Years 1 to 8).

These interventions have been effective in addressing social challenges for at-risk families (Vaithianathan et al, 2016; MSD & OT, 2017). However, there is currently no early intervention strategy that specifically looks to support the families and whānau of children between the ages of three and five – the time that most children will be engaged in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) environment. This means families who are experiencing challenges such as housing unaffordability, food insecurity, financial hardship and trauma may not even know support is available until their Plunket B4 school check or until the child is enrolled in primary school. As a response to this gap, Presbyterian Support Northern has piloted Social Worker in Early Childhood Education (SWiECE): A Social Work Model for Early Intervention with Families in the ECE Environment.

Oranga Tamariki Funded Early Intervention Services and Gap



1.2 Presbyterian Support Northern and Bay of Plenty

The SWiECE service was piloted in Kawerau, a small town with a population of just over 7,000. Kawerau is one of only three localities in the country with a Māori-majority population. It is a tight-knit community with a large intergenerational population - only 10.1% of Kawerau residents were born overseas compared to almost 30% nationally.

The community faces systemic socio-economic challenges which are exacerbated by limited access to income earning opportunities and other supports. Almost 30% of residents have no formal qualifications and the median income is \$20,600. The wider area has relatively high-rates of gang activity and crime. Kawerau also has a 10% unemployment rate — compared to 4-5% nationally — and struggles with addiction and substance abuse issues, with wastewater testing in 2020 showing that the town has the highest methamphetamine use in New Zealand (Newshub, 2020).

Presbyterian Support Northern has been operating in the wider Bay of Plenty area for over 60 years and has focused on the smaller towns that surround Whakatane in the last five years. These towns are often of a low-socio-economic status and have limited access to services because of their geographical distance from main centres. Kawerau was chosen as an ideal place to pilot the SWiECE service because of the need and existing relationships in the wider Bay of Plenty area. After several months in Kawerau the service expanded to the surrounding towns of Edgecumbe and Matata.

1.3 Social Workers in Early Childhood Education

The social worker works in collaboration with children and their families to recognise and develop their strengths, resources, resilience and problem solving abilities, in order to achieve social, educational and economic outcomes. The social worker does not generally work directly with the child but with the parents/caregivers and family/whānau to the benefit of the child. In special circumstances the social worker may work directly with the child. The SWiECE provides information and advice, networking opportunities, advocacy work and general client casework to clients.



Section 2

The Evaluation

This section lays out the data collection, analysis methodology and the intended outcomes of the SWiECE evaluation

2.1 Evaluation Objectives

- a. To determine the effectiveness of the pilot programme in meeting its short-term outcomes of identifying, building relationships with and supporting at-risk families of ECE children.
- b. Capture lessons learnt and identify ways in which the operation and targeting of the SWiECE service can be improved.

2.2 Intended Outcomes

The SWiECE service sought to achieve the following short-term outcome in its first year: **At-risk families and whānau are identified and social worker is able to connect with and support them.**

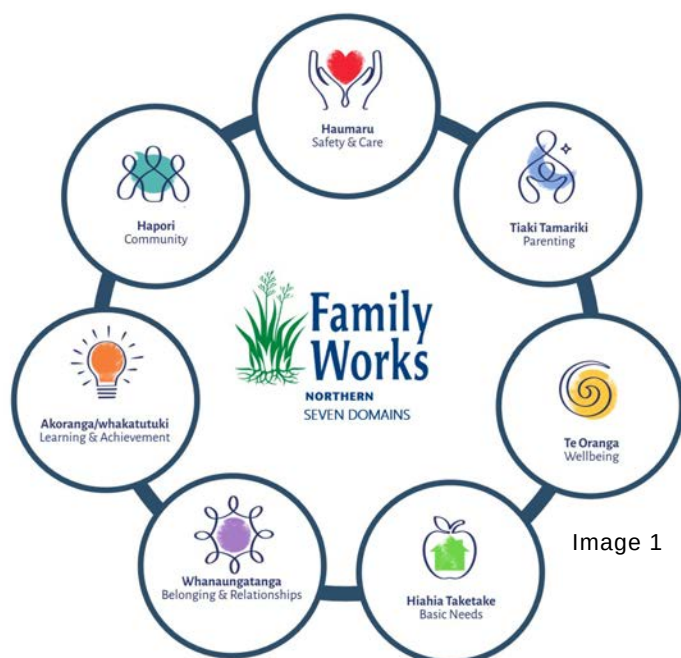
At Risk: For the purposes of this evaluation, "at risk" refers to families who are considered likely to experience negative health and wellbeing outcomes for both the family as a whole and the child individually. Factors that can increase the probability of these negative outcomes (adapted from Oranga Tamariki's indicators) are:

- Lack of material wellbeing
- Child Poverty
- Food insecurity
- Poor housing quality or lack of housing
- Poor mental and physical wellbeing
- Injury prevalence and harm against children
- Family experience of discrimination and/or bullying
- Lack of support for cultural identity
- Poor prenatal care and prenatal exposure to toxins
- Lack of involvement in community

Connect: For the purposes of this evaluation, "connect" means to *build a relationship with the client*. Effective relationships are central to successful outcomes. A positive connection/relationship would be defined as one which is supportive, empathetic, neutral (non-judgmental) and built upon trust.

Support: The SWiECE provides early intervention and preventative social work services to children, young people and their families, using a strengths-based, multi-systemic approach. For the purposes of this evaluation, support means to work hand in hand with a client and their whānau in order to address

risk factors and unmet needs. Goals are set with the client against the Family Works Northern Seven Domains (see image 1) to support this process. Goals might include, for example, creating a safety plan to keep a child safe, or preparing the child to be ready to enter primary school.



2.3 Data Collection

The SWiECE evaluation utilised a qualitative approach, specifically interviews. This approach allowed the evaluation to capture multiple voices and cross-validate findings.

- Semi-structured interviews took place with casework families that worked directly with the social worker during the pilot period as well as ECE staff.
- There were three clients (families) who participated and five ECE staff.
- A semi-structured interview was held with the social worker who worked in the Kawerau ECE during the pilot period.
- Semi-structured interviews were held with the ECE staff that worked alongside the social worker.

2.4 Data Analysis

The interview recordings were thematically analysed by the Service and Evaluation Team. Key-themes were identified and mapped against the intended short-term outcomes of the pilot.



Section 3

Client Vignettes

Three clients shared their stories of working with the social worker and how the programme has impacted their lives and the lives of their children. Client stories have been edited for readability and presented in this section as vignettes. These vignettes demonstrate the range of challenges that clients in Kawerau need support with and the work that the social worker has carried out to help these clients achieve their goals.

All names have been changed to ensure client anonymity.



Shannon & Oakley

I've been in Kawerau now since 2018 and I moved over here because my husband that I was with at the time got a job over here and we managed to buy a house. I moved the family over and at the start of this year, the marriage broke up. My two teenagers moved out, which left me and my three young kids in the house, so that has been a bit of a struggle. One of my children has special needs too.

It was the kindergarten that put me onto the social worker. I was totally open because it was either going to help me or it wasn't. She was very nice and she listened and I just found her really easy to talk to. Especially with the stuff that I was going through at that time. [She helped with basic stuff like] getting a food parcel because things were very tight. She also helped me get some fire wood to keep the children warm during the last winter. Those little things that she does go a long way.

She's helped me get a parenting group started up. It's a parenting support group for parents or caregivers that [have] kids [with] special needs, mainly with autism. We just get together and share information and listen to each

other's stories and just be there for one another. The social worker helped me find a [free] venue which is a big factor because there's no extra money or sponsorship that I can use. She helped give me the push forward to do it.

She's also given me advice on things to do like what can I do differently with the children that I haven't tried [when] something's not working. My son is toilet trained now which was a big accomplishment. There were times going through [toilet training] and I just [thought] oh my God, he's never going to get there, it [was] stressful. She was just there when I [needed to] talk to her. Yeah, she was reassuring.

Another thing she really helped big time with was [...] work and income to do with the childcare subsidy. My child's subsidy just stopped when he turned five. [I struggled to get anywhere during lockdown]. I was stressing out [thinking] I can't afford to pay kindy fees. Do I have to put him in school now when I feel like it's not the right time? Our social worker got hold of work and income - she knows a person up there - and had a talk and managed to get things started back up again. It was a big relief.



James, Robyn and Gemma

We met our social worker through kindy because [our daughter] Gemma is autistic. [The social worker] comes to us or we go to her, sort of whatever suits us really. She [helps] when we have appointments for the occupational therapist and things like that. She'll [...] find out what's going on with them or she will push for things when we don't hear anything. Sometimes if the kindy can't get a response she will join with them and they'll both do it together. We weren't getting anywhere for a few years. And then she basically started advocating for us and it was pretty much... instant. I think if we were on our own... we still wouldn't be anywhere.

[We set goals for Gemma around] speech, toileting and behaviour. The speech is a lot better than what it was. [With the behaviour stuff] I think our social worker told us about how [...] routines are beneficial and [also] staying at home. I was at work and it was harder for Gemma. I like it better being at home. Especially because we see how different she acts now. Before we couldn't take her out into town without her having a meltdown. Now

she knows her limits and she knows when we say no, it's no. She doesn't have as many behavioural issues or meltdowns. She's got a really good morning routine and a night routine. It's been really beneficial for both of us.

I think we got a lot more help once our social worker jumped on board. When the social worker jumped on we found all these other parenting groups. It's really nice [...] just to know parents that have kids on the spectrum. Hearing that [we're] not alone with the struggles we have. At the kindy there are a lot of other autistic kids. And our social worker's like "oh, well you and this parent are going to the same thing. And you could benefit from talking to each other!"

It's nice to have her there [...] as a support person. She goes above and beyond. I think she's made us calmer too. [And she has helped us to] understand that we're not horrible parents it's just that Gemma is going at her own pace. Yeah, just encouraging us that we're doing the best we can. And we are actually achieving goals, even though we think we're not.

June, Daniel & Noah

[I have two grandsons at home] Daniel and Noah. And that's been a learning curve. After the years of not having any kids... well Daniel and Noah came up. So, you know, if we didn't take them, where would they be?

I came to meet our social worker through [the preschool centre]. [After the boys came to me we had an Oranga Tamariki social worker in Rotorua] and she came and said to me, this is the last visit. I thought oh my gosh, where am I going to go? But the SWiECE social worker stepped in and it was great, because the support that I got was really good.

I would come [to see our social worker] probably once a month, a couple of times a month if I needed to. She just fitted around me and that was good. I think it's great to have somebody like her here in Kawerau to help everybody and get that support. I probably wouldn't have had a lot of support if it wasn't [here] in town. I just think there were a lot of times where I needed just to talk to her about

different things. The [boys] behaviour was not good. Noah has got a mind of his own. And when he doesn't want to do anything, you might as well write him off because we end up having a tantrum and he throws himself and he kicks and he screams, you've got to work around him. So we worked with her and she gave me a chart for the kids [like a sticker chart]. [She worked with me to] stay calm and not blow up.

The support I've had all round is great because WINZ (Work and Income New Zealand) also came to the party. I belong to Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, and I get newsletters and everything from them. But our social worker... she was great. I could run [to her office] and talk to her any time. I don't think I've met a person so devoted to a job as what she was, you know, you could talk to her about anything.



Section 4

Findings: Outcomes

The SWiECE pilot provided parenting advice, advocacy, networking and referrals as well as support to meet clients basic needs. This evaluation found — through both client and ECE teacher accounts — that the social worker was able to support casework clients in this capacity and that clients were positively impacted by this support. The evaluation also found that there were a number of secondary outcomes for ECE teachers and their centres.

4.1 Service Need

ECE teachers in Kawerau spoke of the needs that they saw in their communities. From their perspective, the challenges that Kawerau, Edgecumbe and Matata communities face are systemic and borne of socioeconomic factors that create a cycle of inequality and poor outcomes for children. Challenges included, for example, limited access to basic needs, substance abuse issues and gang affiliations.

“Most children need feeding before you can teach them and showering, cleaning and nappies. Most of our children come from gang affiliated homes and one out of three is sexually abused in this area. So really high needs, violent and alcoholic are actually the norm. We're the highest town in the country for methamphetamine, it's almost normalised here. So that's what you're looking at, just about every child is an at-risk child here.”

An ECE teacher spoke about the high-needs within her centre and the lack of resourcing that means her staff often spend more time dealing with social issues than teaching and preparing children for primary school.

“We have a huge increase in children with behaviour needs. At the moment we're waiting for more funding to get more teaching staff [because] we have 36 children on our roll, and we've recognised that 31 of them have extra needs.”

For many of the ECE teachers, lack of support came down to the geographic reality of living in a small town and the tendency for resources to be focused toward denser areas like Whakatane.

“Parenting programmes tend to get run in Whakatane [...] and if people haven't got transport, they miss out because they can't get there.”

Similarly, there was a sentiment that ECE centres are often forgotten because resources were focused on primary schools, leaving ECE centres to manage social issues on their own:

“From an ECE perspective they feel forgotten [and like] they are always put on the backburner. Primary and secondary schools get all these lovely things like fruit and milk and lunches and social workers and they're like well... why can't ECE's get that? We're all under the education umbrella?”

The ECE teachers reported that the community need is high in their communities and that there is a gap for social work support to enable ECE teachers to focus on education. When asked about the value of the SWiECE role one ECE teacher remarked:

“Oh, Godsend. Absolute Godsend.”

4.2 Parenting Advice

All of the clients were able to provide examples of parenting advice that the social worker provided and how the advice helped them to reach the goals that they had set for themselves and the children they were caring for. For Shannon, toilet training Oakley was a huge challenge but she expressed that reaching this goal was possible with the advice and support that she received from the social worker.

June was finding it difficult to manage raising young children with challenging behaviours at a later stage in life. She spoke about the advice that the social worker was able to provide around managing her own emotions and having patience with her two grandsons. For James and Robyn, the parenting advice from the social worker was invaluable, particularly as it related to helping Gemma with emotional regulation.

One ECE teacher, when interviewed, touched on the need for a multi-agency approach to have alignment in the advice and messaging being provided to families, particularly those raising children with learning difficulties and disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorder. She spoke about how the social worker regularly touched base with the early childhood centre about the advice she was giving to ensure that both the centre and the social worker were on the same page.

She applauded how open the social worker was to upskilling in particular areas to ensure that she was giving the best possible advice to parents and caregivers:

“She's really happy to upskill and learn. She had to learn quite a bit about autism, because these families have children with autism. She's had to sort of come to us and ask us what we are doing. So that she's giving the same message as well. She comes in quite friendly and asks: what would you do in this situation?”

The ECE teacher also touched on the importance of aligning messaging with expert advice as well. When working with children who have specific needs, it is vital that both the ECE and the social worker are following best practice when giving advice.

“The occupational therapist was talking around autism [...] and that was their expertise. [...] We need to follow what they are saying. Yes, we've got some knowledge, but they are the experts in this area. So we need to follow their guidance.”

The social worker was able to provide parenting advice to casework clients that helped them to achieve their parenting goals. Further, the ECE staff felt confident that the advice given by the social worker provided families with consistent, coherent and unified support.

4.3 Advocacy

Advocacy was a vital support that the social worker provided for casework clients. James and Robyn spoke about how the social worker's advocacy for their daughter Gemma to get a speech language therapist meant that she was able to receive support after almost two years of being on the service waitlist. The social worker explained how she was able to push for an outcome for her clients:

“It had been two years that the daughter was on the waitlist for a speech and language therapist. COVID was brought up. I took it into consideration. But this referral was done way before COVID. So I emailed the manager directly, explaining the high needs of the child. It was a vital and significant part of her transition to school planning. The parents are hoping to enroll her into school this year, because she's five, but because of where her language is at the moment they are going to keep her on till she's six. So with that push and she was able to be bumped up and within a month she was allocated to a therapist.”

ECE teachers also provided examples of advocacy work that the social worker was able to provide for clients. One ECE teacher shared the following:

“So there was one case where a nanny [whose daughter had an eight-year-old child] was not getting independent child support. The social worker was able to make a referral for us to find someone to help. [The nan's daughter] was back-paid over eight years. If we didn't have that, that Nan would still be struggling to get what's right for [her grandchild].”

ECE teachers spoke about why advocacy is important for the families they work with. Many spoke about the difficulties families in their communities experience when trying to access supports and services. A number of teachers spoke about feeling families are discriminated against and misled when it comes to understanding what supports may be available to them. In these instances having an advocate to support families in navigating these systems has been beneficial:

“She's helped some of our families [with WINZ applications]. She came in here and used our laptops with the families to do some applications because we find our local WINZ office aren't too... accepting and understanding I suppose.”

“[Our families] are discriminated [against] in every way. They are discriminated against by WINZ, [by] doctors and nurses constantly because they have a history. I've got mums that go to WINZ and are told they can't get a benefit unless they immunize their child. They get told they have to abort their babies. So this is what we're dealing with here. They need that advocate, because they don't know any better and they think it's okay and it's not okay. That's happening a lot in this area. They don't feel that they can go in or they feel vulnerable. So having the social worker here who understands that Kaupapa is really important.”

Other ECE teachers spoke about how confusing some of the requirements for

ECE subsidisation can be for families in the district and how having an advocate to support families through this process meant they were more likely to enrol, or keep their children enrolled in centres. One ECE teacher who had yet to begin working with the social worker noted this as being a key support that she wanted:

"I'm hoping that she'll be able to support our families with WINZ applications, because they're finding that quite stressful. That's a lot of work for families and I think they do struggle to do that. We have a couple of families that have said they'd rather just keep the kids at home, than fill in all the WINZ application forms for funding."

According to both the client and ECE teacher, the social worker has been able to advocate for and support a number of casework and non-casework clients to navigate systems and organisations such as Work and Income, Ministry of Social Development and Oranga Tamariki during the pilot period.

4.4 Basic Needs

There were many accounts of the social worker supporting families in Kawerau and surrounding towns to meet their basic needs. This included finding furniture, sourcing firewood, grocery vouchers and housing:

"One of our families weren't in very good living conditions, so the child was having lots of time off. The social worker helped them into a new house and found a couch, [some] furniture and clothing and things for

the children. And now that little girl comes to kindergarten just about every day, a lot healthier."

"Last year, she got these amazing Christmas presents for our children and it actually made our children's Christmas. She has got vouchers for some of our families and to be able to give a family a grocery voucher, the tears, just, you know, huge."

ECE teachers were able to come to the social worker with the issues they were regularly seeing and the social worker was able to go out into the community and source solutions for the centres so they could easily meet the basic needs of their families. This is a task centres may not ordinarily have the time or resources to do themselves. One example of this was finding an accessible solution to a headlice problem:

"One centre had a number of cases of head lice. And they were wondering, do our pharmacies provide anything or the GPs? So I went out looking around and [tapped into] the public health nurses, and the preschool nurses [to ask] what do you guys know? Can we get some free stuff for families? And they said yes. Thankfully, yeah, our pharmacy provides free head lice treatment, parents just have to go in."

Accounts from both clients and ECE staff demonstrate that the social worker has been able to support both clients and centres in meeting the basic needs of local families.

4.5 Networking & Referrals

ECE teachers spoke about a number of instances in which the social worker was able to provide referrals for clients. One ECE teacher talked about the social worker's ability to persevere when referrals didn't work out and ensure that an outcome is reached for that client:

“We keep persevering and get turned down, turned down, turned down. [The social worker] was able to make a referral for us to find someone to help that [client], it worked out that that person was actually hopeless. But we were still able to go back to [the social worker] to make a second referral to someone else that might help.”

In this example the client was unable to get the support that they needed through the original referral provided by the social worker. But having the social worker available and on site meant that a second referral could be made so that the outcome could be achieved for this client.

The social worker spoke about the importance of networking in the community as a key part of her role to ensure that Presbyterian Support Northern is represented in the community and that there is an awareness of the service that she and PSN offer:

“I had to promote myself out there on my own, with a different organisation and a different role. I had to really put it out there or else it just wasn't going to get out there.”

Lots of networking, with services I already knew but they didn't know about what I did. Attending community events, as well. I kind of see that as representing Family Works Northern in the community, because it's just to create an awareness in the community that Family Works is here and we've been here for quite a while now.”

ECE teachers that worked closely with the social worker made it clear she was able to provide referrals if and when appropriate.

4.6 Emotional Support

Although this was not a specific aspect of the SWiECE job description, emotional support was something that clients spoke about extensively during interviews:

“I could talk to [the social worker] about anything. She was just there, she's a person that you can just ring text or talk to, and she would make time for you. [It is] really good to know that you've got that person that you can just ring.”

One ECE teacher spoke about this as well, explaining that being a person that families could trust and talk to about whatever was concerning them was a vital aspect of the role:

“Just being that listening ear for families, somebody that they can talk to and feel comfortable that she's a trusted person that they can share problems that they're going through? And just being available when they need her.”

4.7 Crisis Support

One unintended outcome of the SWiECE service was that ECE staff felt that they had someone they could reach out to in times of crisis. One ECE teacher explained how beneficial it was knowing that she could pick up the phone and call the social worker for support when situations escalated:

“I've had to ring the social worker in the past with an SOS, where I've had a father, who was going through some custody issues with his children. And I have quite a good relationship with this guy. But he was at rock bottom. Absolute rock bottom. And I had spent nearly two hours in the office with him crying on my shoulder. And I just said to him, look, this is more than I can deal with. So I got on the phone, and I rang [the SWiECE] and she was here within five minutes. So that was really good that she could come in and support us in that situation.”

The SWiECE also spoke of a situation in which she was able to provide crisis support to a family who were processing grief over the loss of a loved one:

“If they've got a family that's going through a bit of a crisis [for example] one family that, lost the grandfather, and was going through some heavy grief and loss. The centre just didn't really know how to deal with it and wanting to know about supports that they could refer families to. Then they thought, oh, no, we've got the social worker. She can take care of that stuff. Yeah. So it was like, yeah, random phone call. Can you

come and see us? We've got this family [dealing with] grief and loss and [we] don't know what to do.”

4.8 Transition Support

The social worker was also able to support parents in transitioning their children to primary school. The SWiECE spoke about supporting a client in this respect:

“The centres do have a plan for the child [to transition to primary school which is] between the centre and the parents and caregivers. Where I come in is just making sure that other involved services are on board with the plan. For example, the solo mum raising her son with autism. We're going through his transition to school plan and I started having discussions with the supervisor that oversees the special needs unit at the school, along with his early intervention teacher. [I was able to] explain that this is what he's been diagnosed with, this is what he can currently do at this stage [and ask] what can your school offer this child to ensure he's safe? He's getting educated on a daily basis and when he's in your environment, what does their quality of learning look like? She assured us that he will be well supported in terms of his education needs. And the whānau will be supported [for example] if mom wanted to come in and do observations to see how her son was coping. How the teachers would support him to regulate if he was to have meltdowns, and things like that.”

4.9 Report of Concern Advice

Another unintended outcome of the pilot was that centres felt able to go to the social worker for advice, particularly around Oranga Tamariki and making a report of concern (RoC). An ECE teacher explained:

“[We had a family and they hadn't been with us for] long but [the SWiECE] knows them from another service. I was at the point of [wondering] do I actually need to do a report of concern? Because there were some things that I was noticing that didn't sit quite right. But I was able to have that conversation with [the SWiECE] and talk to her about it. We've realised that at this stage, no, we'll just keep an eye on things, we'll be there for support.”

The social worker also spoke about this as something that centres had sought advice on. Conversations like this allowed the ECE staff to work alongside the social worker and put supports in place to ensure families were getting all of the support possible before making a report of concern:

“Sometimes centres just want a second opinion, or just someone to have a consultation with and they're like, do you think this is enough to do an RoC? Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. Sometimes it's like, well, you know, let's think of some intervention strategies so you don't have to do that. Let's think of early intervention, rather than just going straight to the RoC.”

Having this input from a trained social worker who is able to recognise and help to implement early intervention strategies has clearly benefitted ECE centre staff who spoke about appreciating this support.



Section 5

Findings: Strengths

The ECE teachers and the SWiECE spoke about the strengths of the pilot and the elements of the pilot that lead to the achievement of the short-term outcomes mentioned in section 4.

5.1 The Right Person

When speaking with the ECE teachers it was clear that many of them derived a great deal of mana from the work that they do in their communities:

“I was born in Kawerau, I've lived here all my life. This is my community and I've taught a lot of our children here now. I've taught a lot of the parents, aunties, uncles. We're on second generation at the moment, it's pretty special. I have a connection with a lot of the community because I've been living here all my life.”

The ECE teachers in Kawerau spoke of the importance of having someone in the role who knows the community and is able to build relationships with clients:

“[The social worker] is similar to me, born and bred in this community and knows a lot of people. And having those relationships is really important in a community like this, because a lot of our families put up brick walls pretty quickly. And it takes a long time to be able to break through those piece by piece before you can actually have that relationship. But if you've already got connections, it's a lot easier.”

The social worker spoke about how she approaches working with families who are hesitant to engage or have a pattern of non-engagement with social services. She spoke to the importance of honesty and transparency when working in a community that is used to services 'coming and going':

“I suppose, for me, what it comes down to is being professional, but also being myself. Being transparent in everything I do and making sure that when I do communicate to these families, it's in a way where they can comprehend. But still maintaining my scope of practice, and my competencies, that I adhere to. It's kind of like being professional, but also having that Manaaki and aroha in the way that you talk to these families, because they know when you're not genuine, and they know when you're just trying to fish for information. And, you know, they know, and the next time you won't get a second visit. So I think it's really being true to who you are, being yourself.”

For the ECE teachers, this was exactly the right approach for their communities:

“She just softly and slowly talks to them. So there's one family that's just signed up with her properly, but every time she was here, she'd just chat with the mum. Just quietly chat, and then you know, the next week it would be a little bit longer. She doesn't jump in and say I think you've got a problem and you need some help.”

“I think she's extremely personable. She's got that mana that people warm to quickly. The two families that I have introduced her to were both families that I thought might say 'No, thank you, I'm fine'. Yet they both engaged really quickly with her. [There are] families that really are not ready to let anybody in, [but] I think if anyone was going to get engagement, she would be the sort of person that would.”

For ECE teachers, it was clear that much of the success of the SWiECE pilot could be attributed to the person who was hired for the position. The social worker not only had an understanding of the community, she was a *part* of the community. This meant that she understood how to effectively connect with families but it also meant that ECE teachers felt comfortable letting the social worker become a part of their ECE communities. Without this buy-in from centre staff, there would be a clear engagement issue because the social worker would not have access to the clients. It is a testament to the good-fit of the SWiECE hire that the ECE staff in this pilot felt comfortable with having her work with their families.

5.2 Service Flexibility

A number of centre staff spoke about how beneficial it was having a service that is flexible and able to adapt to the specific needs of the centres and clients. One ECE teacher explained:

It's great that her role is outside of the square. As in you don't have to fit a specific criteria, it's just whatever you need support with, we'll give it a go. Which I absolutely love. We're noticing a lot of our children need support, but they don't fit the criteria to get any support from the Ministry of Health or from Ministry of Education. But they still need support. It's the same with our families. They probably don't fit criteria through other services. But through this service, we find a way.

For ECE teachers, the flexibility of the service gave them an opportunity to make the service work for them and the families in their ECE communities.

To begin with, we were obviously finding our way around. What was her role going to be? How did it fit into this kind of situation where it can be really busy and you can agree to have a meeting, and then it goes to custard? She's been really great and we've just communicated [...] and she's really open to that kind of communication and feedback, which is great.

This kind of flexibility was important given the social worker worked with a range of centres with different needs and operating models. It was clear that each centre had their own needs and the social worker was able to be flexible and cater the service and support to the specific needs of the centres and their families:

Originally, we thought that [the social worker would spend time in the centre so that she could be] building relationships with families. But the problem is that families come in at different times here, they're not like in a kindergarten coming in at 8:30am and leaving at 2:30pm, they're staggered. So it would be really hard for her to 'catch parents' so to speak. So now she tends to work mainly through the teachers. If we have a need we will ring her or email her and say, this is what we're noticing - what can we do for this family? Sometimes she's picked them up as a case and sometimes she's gone and found some resources when they're not interested in the direct referral.

One ECE teacher explained that in addition to needs being different from centre to centre, needs also change with time. She spoke about a growing problem in her own community around basic needs following on from the effects of COVID-19 and her expectation this would grow in the new year. This is an important consideration for the SWiECE role as there is a need to be agile and adaptable to needs that are constantly shifting.

“We're in Edgcumbe, so different needs to Kawerau. We probably have less social issues, but housing is our big one. [...] So there isn't a huge, huge need here. Although it is increasing, we've got increasing housing issues and families without housing and I think in the new year, we'll probably be calling on her quite a bit more just about food and clothing. I would say that things are going to change quite a bit in the town.”

In addition to remaining agile and flexible in catering to different ECEs and their variable needs the social worker was also flexible in her work with clients, ensuring she worked around their requirements and needs.

“I love the office here. It just gives families options, whether they want a home visit or an office visit, or they want to meet at the centre.”

This level of flexibility was important to clients, some of whom lived outside of the town and others who didn't have

access to transport to reach services if they weren't located in the town:

“It worked out really well because I used to drop George off at day-care at nine o'clock. So I was in town, so, you know, she just fitted around me and that was good.”

For clients and ECE teachers, the flexibility of the service was an important contributor to the programme reaching its intended short-term outcomes. This included flexibility in referral criteria, flexibility in the way that the service worked for each unique ECE centre and flexibility in working alongside clients to achieve goals at their own pace and in a way that works for them.



Section 6

Findings: Learnings

This section explores the learnings that came out of the pilot evaluation.

6.1 Funding and Resources

When asked about how the service could be improved, the social worker spoke about being able to provide koha as an acknowledgement of the work that families have done to transition their children to school:

“It would be great if we had some funding to enable us to provide resources for families. For example, if we had a client and we were part of their transition to school plan and the client achieved the plan as like a celebration graduation sort of gift coming out of ECE to school would be nice.

To have a start-up pack for school, like a bag, a lunchbox or drink bottle. Even if they already had one set up. It'd be cool to give them a koha you know, and maybe a Pak'n'Save voucher or something like just to acknowledge the families, acknowledge the work, the progress that, you know, has been made to get that child to school. And all their needs and goals have been achieved and met. Just really highlighting the success would be great.

The social worker also spoke about how beneficial it would be to run programmes (e.g. raising children with autism) in the area so that parents who don't have access to programmes in main-centres could participate:

“It would be really [being able to] facilitate and deliver programmes. That's been a bit of a trend coming through where some parents are like: where are the parenting programmes around here? There's nothing here. Which there is, but sometimes it's not

for the specific preschool age, more primary school age. So there's kind of a gap there, or some of them are delivered at Whakatane and [transport] is a barrier for families.”

The key theme here is around funding and resources and having enough of these to adequately meet the needs of direct social work clients and other families in the community. Future iterations of the SWiECE project should assess the specific needs of the community, map out the resources needed to meet these needs and ensure that there is a plan in place to provide these resources.

6.2 Introducing the Role

The social worker and ECE staff that she worked alongside spoke about the difficulty of engaging with families who are often disenchanted with NGOs, government services and other supports. ECE teachers explained that many families in the community have had off-putting experiences with providers in the area as well as well as with government organisations. As a result, many families were 'put off' by the idea of having "another" social worker in their lives.

“The referral process is always tricky here, I feel, not just with the service, but with any service because there are a lot of families that don't want support. We've had a lot of conversations around promoting the service away from the idea of social work because the label of social worker turns people off.”

“I remember the first couple of weeks I tried to introduce people [and say] this is our early childhood social worker... and the look on people's faces. It's like, why are you talking to me about this? Do you think I've got a need?”

The social worker spoke about this challenge at the beginning and how she worked alongside centre staff to promote the service to families and help them understand the nature of the role and how it was a stand-alone service, unrelated to other organisations such as Oranga Tamariki.

“Their world view on social workers is oh, my gosh, she's linked with the police. She's linked with Oranga Tamariki. She will take your kids. For me, it was around how you communicate it to parents, caregivers, center managers and staff. [Saying] when you are promoting [the service], this is how you could word it. So that was a little bit challenging for the first six months.”

The ECE teachers had all aligned their messaging to this approach, explaining that they still ensure that potential clients understand that the SWiECE role is a social worker, but that she is independent of organisations like the police or Oranga Tamariki.

“She is a social worker, but she's here to help you. She's not here to take your children off you. I just explain to them that we've got [the social worker] here, if you want to have a referral, that's easy, I can just email her or ring her.”

“[One family] were already involved with Oranga Tamariki and pretty burned by that. When they had issues, it was great to be able to say this social worker has nothing to do with OT, but she's got these connections and supports - she can help. That felt really good, to have somebody that we could refer to that wasn't OT. And I think I was surprised how quickly the families took that on. I thought it might be [hard] understanding the difference. But they got that real quick, which is good.”

Once the ECEs in the centre were able to cater their messaging to allay the concerns of families, referrals and therefore engagement came easier. On reflection, one ECE teacher said that it would be beneficial to present the social worker as a team member rather than an external support.

“I did have an idea that it would be really good to have a team photo with her in it. So they see that she she is part of our team to help support. Not singled out on her own. This is the teaching team. And this is our social worker who helps us with WINZ, doctors etc.”

6.3 Balancing Schedules

As explored in previous sections, each centre had their own needs and ideas about how the SWiECE role could work to best fit their needs. For some ECEs using a referral only approach worked best. For these centres teachers saw themselves as the appropriate people to identify needs and make referrals.

In other ECEs there was a desire to have more face time with the SWiECE and to have her be more present in the centres.

“I think that's something that we need to strengthen. And it's no fault at all [of the social worker] because she's got a busy job but I think [it would help for her to] be a lot more visible in the centres, popping in and interacting, with the children, coming in and talking with us and staff - talking with all the staff, not necessarily just the head teacher. Perhaps, just coming in here a couple of hours a week interacting with children, sitting on the mat out there. I can't always make a [successful] referral if [families] don't see [the social worker] regularly. That's a barrier for us and them. So that's asking the impossible, really, but I think that that would [really] help.”

“It would be great if [the social worker] could be with us for a whole day, once a week. So she actually became part of the team. Got to know, parents, the parents got to know the service that she could offer. Then they could come informally to her with just anything like the small issues that are going on in families, because they probably wouldn't come in and share those. But if they knew there was a social worker on site, they might then just think I could just run into that person. We only really see the tip of the iceberg, when it gets to the point where they're not coping. Whereas if she was there, you know, ambulance at the top of the cliff, instead of the bottom, it would be fabulous. So maybe once a fortnight or a day or half a day.”

These accounts provide valuable feedback about improving the SWiECE

service but they also indicate that centre staff see the SWiECE service as part of the fabric of their ECE centres and have a desire to further integrate this into the way they operate.

6.4 Social Work Connections

The social worker talked about supporting families with school transition planning, but only to the extent that she would communicate with school and parents. When asked if she was able to provide a hand-over to social workers based in schools so that clients could continue to be supported after leaving the ECE environment the social worker talked about the lack of social work resource in local schools:

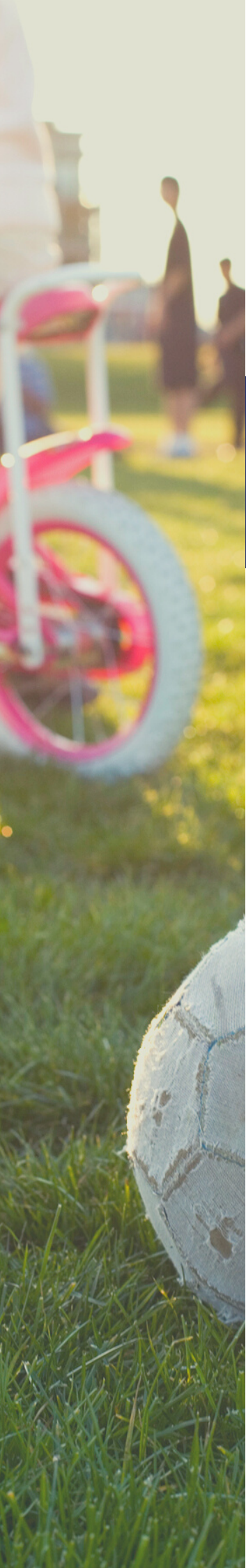
“At the moment another organisation holds the contracts for social worker in schools - two positions. But I'm unsure if both of those positions have been filled yet. At the moment, there are no SWiS. Once they do get some SWiS out there. I'll definitely be knocking on their doors.”

When asked about the Family Start service and transitioning clients onto the ECE service from here she pointed out the complexities of this because the contract is, again, held by another organisation

“That's been in Kawerau for a long, long time. I did some networking with them and they are fully truly aware of the SWiECE service. But I do understand family start can take children up until they are five.”

They know about the service. They know. [But] it's up to the families at the end of the day, whether they want to continue with services or not.

While it is clear that the service has been able to fill a 'gap' in early intervention by providing social work service in the ECE environment, there is still work to be done to smooth the client journey for those who may require additional support following ECE. Similarly, there is an opportunity to collaborate with other organisations in the community to offer support for Family Start clients who have transitioned to the ECE environment.



Section 7

Conclusion

The SWIECE service sought to achieve the following short-term outcome in its first year: at-risk families are identified and the social worker is able to connect with and support them.

This evaluation has found that the social worker was able to fully meet the short-term outcomes of the pilot. The social worker held a formal case load of clients that she was able to provide with advice, support to meet basic needs, referrals to appropriate professionals and services, emotional support and advocacy. Clients spoken to felt that the support that they received from the social worker was excellent.

ECE-centres reported substantial benefits from the service. They generally agreed that the social worker gave them someone to go to for advice and support and also freed up their resources so that they could focus on teaching children and preparing them for primary school. It was clear that ECE-centres all had their own needs and expectations of the service and the social worker has demonstrated flexibility in meeting the needs of unique ECE-centres and the communities that they serve.

For these centres, it was important that the social worker had a strong understanding of the community and a number of ECE-teachers expressed how much they valued that the SWIECE had grown up in Kawerau and was therefore a part of the community. For this reason it is important that future iterations of the SWIECE service give similarly careful consideration to who is hired for the position as this was a clear point of buy-in for many of the ECE-centres.

The social worker and ECE staff experienced 'teething issues' with securing initial or ongoing engagement from clients. Discussions with both the SWiECE and the ECE-teachers suggested that they have given these issues consideration and the social worker and ECE-staff members are working together to implement solutions to encourage engagement. Future iterations of the SWiECE service could give consideration to the 'marketing' of the social worker role and the messaging that SWiECE and ECE staff provide to families. This, paired with increased social worker visibility in ECE centres may improve engagement and caseload /referral numbers.

The SWiECE pilot was left intentionally flexible and experimental in nature and this has ultimately worked to the advantage of the service as a whole. ECE staff valued being able to refer clients without having to meet rigid referral

criteria. This evaluation has found that service flexibility meant the service could be tailored to the community, rather than the community having to tailor themselves to the service.

In summary, the SWiECE service is a promising intervention for ensuring that families who need extra support are not missed between pre-school age and primary school. The service has supported numerous families in the wider Bay of Plenty area and this evaluation has found that the support has been of a high quality and has had a positive impact on the lives of the children and their families and whānau. If the service can be successfully linked with other services in the early intervention space such as Family Start and SWiS this programme has the potential to ensure that families of all young children in areas where SWiECE operates receive targeted and specialised support through the early youth development stages.