From Pipettes to Playdates: Establishing a Parent Support Group in a Research Setting

Rhea J Longley1,2,3\*, Andre L Samson1,2, Georgia Atkin-Smith1,2, Alex R Carey Hulyer1, Trent Ashton1, Nadia M Davidson1,2

1 Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, Parkville, Australia

2 Department of Medical Biology, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia

3 Faculty of Tropical Medicine, Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand

\*corresponding author

**Address:** WEHI,1G Royal Parade, Parkville, VIC 3052, Australia

**Phone:** +61 3 9345 2186

**Email:** Longley.r@wehi.edu.au

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**Abstract**

In this article, we discuss our experiences and perspectives in forming a workplace Parents Group. We reflect on the need for these networks, what has worked well, and the challenges we’ve experienced. We also provide some practical advice for those with parenting-related career disruptions for addressing this topic in grant applications.

**Graphical summary**

Graphic from Vivienne Samson (age 7)

In this article, we discuss the conceptualisation, formation, and management of our workplace Parents Group. We honestly reflect on both our successes and challenges.

**Article**

It is puzzling that parenthood feels like a niche hobby among scientists, even though it is one of the most universal experiences. Maybe scientists are just experts at compartmentalizing work and family, or perhaps they rely on a strong support network—from a partner or grandparents who handle the day-to-day care. Or, perhaps more concerning, science may be losing those who prioritize family life—and if we are honest, that often means mothers. Indeed, a study that compared scientists over time who had one or more children with those who did not, found that new parents are significantly less likely to remain in science careers, with 71% of new mothers citing the reason for departure as “family-related” (1).

Without doubt, parents of young children face unique challenges in their careers that can be hard to navigate. They are often juggling intense time constraints, battling sleep deprivation and childcare illnesses, and may encounter workplace discrimination, especially around career progression and flexibility (2). Ironically, these challenges can reduce their capacity to organically build supportive networks, leaving them more vulnerable to isolation. A dedicated parent network, or ‘Parents Group,’ offers a vital way to connect individuals facing similar struggles (3).

In Australia, local governments place parents of newborns into small, community-based parent groups of around 6-14 members, a system that has been in place for over 30 years due to its success in providing support during early parenthood (4). These groups help parents navigate one of life’s most challenging phases, and lifelong friendships often form as a result. Inspired by this model—and finally with the ability to support newer parents ourselves as our babies were no longer babies—we set out to create a Parents Group within our research institute.

**The birth of our workplace Parents Group**

During an early 2022 meeting of our Institute’s Gender Equality in Science (GEiS) committee, we proposed forming a Parents Group to create a means for networking, peer support, and advocacy (see **Box 1**). Our idea was inspired by the success of a parenting network at another local institute, where regular parent meetups had fostered connections and support systems that might not have formed organically. We initially envisioned a structure like Australia’s community-based maternal and child health parenting groups, with small groups of new parents (3). However, it quickly became clear that replicating the community-based model would not be feasible with only a handful of people returning from parental leave every month (but realizing this is a time of high stress and possible isolation we now provide protein balls to individuals using the lactation rooms at three of our Institute’s physical sites, along with a QR code to side up to the Parents Group). Instead we decided to launch our Parents Group at our Institute-wide forum and hold a structured first meeting to scope interest and identify the most beneficial format for parents. Within seven months of its conception, our first meeting took place, which was attended by more than 20 staff members. The strong turnout underscored the need for the group, particularly as a source of peer support, connection, and a channel for providing anonymous feedback on Institute policies affecting parents (5).

**Our progress – experience running a workplace Parents Group**

Following our initial meeting in late 2022, we organised casual monthly catchups of the Parents Group for the rest of the year and throughout 2023. To accommodate part-time workers (3) and those with varying lab schedules, we alternated the time and day of these meetups each month as well as rotating between in-person and hybrid formats. We held an end of year celebration on-site with children and one informative event on how to address career disruption (6) in grant applications (along with the institute’s Research Grants and Development Office, see **Box 2**). In Australia, we are relatively fortunate with government-sponsored parental leave, providing up to 22 weeks at minimum wage (7), noting that this varies in other countries from 0 weeks in the United States to 161 weeks in Finland (8). Many employers also offer additional benefits, frequently topping up pay to full salary for several weeks, and unpaid leave up to 12 months. Our main research funding bodies have policies to help offset career disruptions due to family responsibilities—the Australian Research Council (ARC) allows for up to two years per child in assessing research output (9), while the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) deducts carer’s leave and periods of part-time work from track-record assessments (10).However, it remains debatable as to whether career disruption is consistently accounted for by peer reviewers when assessing applications (6).

Over 2023, the group membership grew to over 80, however attendance at the monthly catchups ebbed throughout the year to a point that many catchups had no attendance. We attempted to provide participants with smaller sub-groups based on the age of their children, but this was also not successful (see below). So, in early 2024 we sought feedback from the Parents Group through a survey. Perhaps not surprising, the data revealed that parents were simply too time-poor, but they encouraged us to persevere. In response, we switched to more informal fortnightly catchups in our Institute’s tearoom. A more frequent schedule increases the opportunities for people to find a good time they can attend, and the casual set up with no need for room bookings reduced the burden on the leadership team. We also held another on-site event where parents could bring in their children, coinciding with a local public holiday that our Institute recognises at a different time (and when parents may have limited access to childcare).

Throughout our time leading this group, we have actively tried to improve communication and information for parents at our Institute. We have worked with the communications team to update information on our intranet and have set up an online chat for parents. Further, we make a dedicated effort to reach those returning to work from parental leave with the support of our Institute’s human resources team and through the QR codes in the lactation rooms as mentioned earlier. Further, information on the Parents Group is circulated to those returning from leave, and we’ve also placed QR codes (along with protein balls) in the lactation rooms at three of our Institute’s physical sites.

**Success stories from our workplace Parents Group**

Reflecting on the two years since we founded our workplace Parents Group, we are proud of the contribution it has made to supporting a sense of belonging and inclusiveness for parents at work. We have striven to create an environment where parenthood is accepted and discussed, rather than being ignored or thought of as a distraction. Members have continued to provide encouragement for the leadership team to keep the group active and continue to hold casual coffee catch ups, even when attendance may be low. Whilst there are many aspects we haven’t yet perfected (see below), it has importantly provided a means of contact for parents or parents-to-be who are seeking information about policies and programs at our workplace or who want to provide anonymous feedback through the GEiS committee. This has occurred on numerous occasions and has at times resulted in changes or clarifications to internal policy, or simply increased awareness, from items such as childcare support to “keeping in touch days” (11) whilst on parental leave. Having an online chat channel for communication has also enabled re-homing of various child-related items and sharing of articles of interest to members. Activities with the highest level of engagement have been the information session on CD in grants (see above and Box 2) and our end of year event with parents and children. Encouragingly, we even had several non-parent staff and students attend this event to support their colleagues and help with logistics.

**The challenges of connecting a group of time-poor people**

Working parents are time poor and often have set schedules of when they need to arrive and leave work based on childcare arrangements. Depending on their role, this can mean they have limited time for extracurricular activities during the workday. Further, working parents are also prone to last minute changes in schedules due to unforeseen circumstances (i.e. sick children, particularly during the first months of childcare (12)). This has been a challenge for our workplace Parents Group and has led to the various iterations we have tested in the way we run the group, to try and increase attendance at catchups and events. The current format, whilst more regular, involves simply grabbing a cup of coffee in the morning or afternoon once a fortnight – which is manageable for our leadership team with their existing schedules. We will continue to reflect each year whether this pattern remains suitable and whether we are reaching many of our 80+ members. A related challenge is that our Parents Group is led and managed by volunteers who themselves are scientists and parents. We need to work on a sustainable version of this group into the future, to account for movement of staff and students into new roles and workplaces throughout their career. Currently, the leadership team is housed within the GEiS committee, and hopefully this provides access to new motivated leaders to continue the Parents Group into the future. As briefly mentioned, we attempted a process of seeking interest and then sorting group members into small sub-groups based on the age of their children (we also considered factors like location and other interests, but this was not always possible). Catching up within these groups was then to be initiated and organised by the groups themselves, however in reality this did not occur – again likely due to participants being time-poor.

**Conclusion**

Whilst it has been challenging to provide a means for peer support and networking for inherently time-poor people, we believe that what we’ve established at our workplace is important and is valued by these same people. We have also increased the visibility of parents at work, by having an event each year where children are welcome and by displaying our “Parents Group” sign when we have coffee catch ups in the tearoom. We’ve created an important route for advocacy for people who wish to be anonymous and would like to do more in this area into the future. Our one informational event was well attended and is a focus for us into the next year, whether this be a combined science/life seminar by a person willing to talk about how they’ve integrated being a parent into their career (or vice versa) or intersectional focus areas identified such as neurodivergence. We encourage others who may be interested in setting up a similar workplace parents’ network to reach out to us, or alternatively, if you’ve already done this and overcome some of our challenges, we’d love to hear from you too. Finally, if you are parent who made it all the way through this article, we thank you for using your precious time to read it, and congratulations on all your achievements, at work and at home.

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RJL, ALS and ND led writing. ARCH created Box 2. All authors edited and contributed to the final manuscript.

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**Boxes**

**Box 1: Original intentions of our workplace Parents Group**

1. Peer support: moral support to career and work advice.
2. Networking opportunity: group members to come from a range of research areas/roles and career stages, and this would expand a participant’s network beyond those they’d normally interact with at the Institute.
3. Communication: an additional means to communicate the Institute’s policies and programs relevant to parents.
4. Advocacy: the group could help evaluate and provide feedback on the Institute’s (and external) policies and programs relating to parenting and Career Disruption (CD), potentially resulting in new focus areas for the Gender Equity committee.
5. Visibility: increase awareness of the diverse challenges that working parents face, especially amongst colleagues who aren’t parents.

**Box 2: Key tips for addressing CD in grant applications**

*Note: The major Australian medical research funding body (NHMRC) enables researchers to quantify and address the impact of CD on their scientific output and impact. Whilst all schemes will vary, we believe these insights may be useful for researchers embarking on their first period of parental leave.*

1. Carefully read the guidelines for each scheme to understand what qualifies as CD, and how this may impact your eligibility (i.e. for schemes with years’ post-PhD limits).
2. CD is often strictly defined as a continuous absence or formal long-term part-time arrangement with a Full Time Equivalent less than 100%. This may be due pregnancy, major illness or injury, carer responsibilities, or the like. Evidence of formal leave or part-time work, such as a letter from your HR department, is required in many cases.
3. Funders encourage a discussion of CD to allow realistic comparison of your career with those who have not experienced CD, so be open about the negative impacts, but emphasise the significance of what you achieved in your circumstances. It is your choice whether you share any personal information, but you may consider addressing factors such as:
   1. What was your publication rate in years before or after CD (and can you estimate what you would have produced without CD)?
   2. Did your CD allow others to publish a key discovery first, might a given publication have received more attention if it had been published earlier?
   3. Did your CD limit your ability to attend conferences and develop new collaborations?
   4. Did pregnancy affect your research i.e. unsafe to use certain techniques or visit collaborators?
4. Keep your own records of CD and its impact. When you change employers, ask for a letter from HR to confirm these before your leave.