

# Emergent leadership



There's no doubt about it, Playcentre produces leaders. Every week I meet someone with connections to Playcentre out there changing the world. As I come to the end of my six year journey as a centre member and contemplate the future in my role as co-president of Auckland Association, I find myself delving into the history of emergent leadership, reflecting on my own experiences and ultimately laying down a challenge to my association. We need to change and the time is now!

My family joined Maungawhau Playcentre in Mt Eden six years ago. Maungawhau had a reputation in Auckland Association for being one of the staunchest Playcentres around. We were (and are!) a hard working bunch; fiercely protective of our association's philosophies and practices, which include group supervision and high training expectations for members. It's no surprise that in my second week at Maungawhau I found myself emerging into my first centre role. The position of fundraising officer was vacant and I remember thinking 'I wonder if they'd let me do that job?' A nano-second later I received a folder marked 'fundraising' and the job was mine. I got to grips with the position over the next year, with mixed success, but a lot of enthusiasm. At the same time I was invited around for cups of coffee, went to meetings, got stuck into the training with the help of my Course 1 buddy and my family started to make real friends. My 'contribution muscle' was strengthened by the support and encouragement of other centre members. I was valued, I belonged and I was hooked!

When my youngest daughter arrived, I pulled back from all but my basic Playcentre commitments. As energy levels and time and negotiations with my family allowed, I took on new challenges. This cycle of contributing as energy and time allowed and renewing when needed, has been a key to making Playcentre a sustainable option for our family in the

long-term. Although there have been times when the workload required has taken me (and my husband!) right to the edge.

As I continued to emerge in and out of leadership positions both within my centre and the Association, I began to realise that all was not rosy in the land of emergent leadership. Critical positions remained unfilled at association level, piling work onto already overworked office holders. My first experience on our Board of Management was a huge eye opener – there was no head space or time available for forward focused leadership, only putting out fires and treading water. Workloads created the serious danger of burnout. It appeared to me that for many of us the concept of emergent leadership seemed to go hand-in-hand with increasingly unsustainable voluntary workloads.

This was equally true at centre level and I began to acknowledge the families that our system 'ate up and spat out'. Taking on these workloads seemed to be upheld as a valiant and necessary part of our culture.

Jean Goldschmidt says in Good Clean Fun that: "The amazing thing about groups is that whatever is needed is always there. Emergent leadership allows the talent, the new idea, the support, whatever, to appear."

Jean is absolutely right, however if the work of the group becomes too great, the space and time necessary to nurture talents, new ideas and allow leadership to emerge, will diminish. We risk becoming (if we aren't already in Auckland) an elitist organisation that is inaccessible to marginal groups; and most dangerously our ability to self-care, to support one another and to build vibrant communities through Playcentre diminishes.

I'd heard mutterings of similar feelings across my association, but it was through facilitating teamwork discussions that I confirmed that these experiences

## A little history

The concept of emergent leadership was born out of simpler times in our organisation's history. I'm talking about the days before bulk funding complicated licensing procedures; and NZQA qualifications and quality management systems. The ideal of nurturing and cultivating leaders to emerge from within our organisation, rather than turning to outside 'experts', reflects the grass roots nature of Playcentre and our faith in the abilities of parents to get the job done.

The term 'emergent leadership' was coined by one of Auckland Association's most influential life members, the late Lex Grey. The concept harks back to his experiences serving on fighter planes in World War 2. Each person on the plane had a part to play and each person took on a leadership role during missions. It was during his tenure as Auckland Association president (1953 and 1957) that Lex did two crucial things to embed the concept of emergent leadership into our culture. The first was to ask the committee of the day to resign. From what I can gather, the committee back then was made up of external experts in early childhood from the local university and teachers college. Lex was adamant that parents should be involved in Playcentre at every level and so he established a new committee run by parents from within the association. The second change Lex made was to limit the tenure of the president to three years. These actions laid two foundations stones for emergent leadership:

Our leaders should be our own Playcentre parents and not outside experts; and  
Our leaders have a shelf life, creating the need to nurture and encourage new leaders to emerge and be reflective of our ever changing and evolving membership.

were common amongst our members. Training is such a wonderful way to connect with parents across our association and there was a recurring theme in their stories: 'There is simply too much to do, this isn't fun, there has to be another way.'

Like Robbie Burke says 'Playcentre is in the blood' and I couldn't let go of a deep seated desire for change. Events and opportunities conspired and I found myself emerging into my next leadership role in my association last year as the role of co-president in partnership with Justine Reid. We have committed to doing this role together for the full three year term. Why? Because the time for change is now.

In Good Clean Fun Geraldine McDonald states that *"Playcentre has survived not because of inspiration but because of adaptability. And women's commitment to adaption."*

## The time has come to adapt


The need for change is reiterated in Woodhams Research's timely report 'Supporting Playcentres in the 21st Century' which highlights that parents all over the country feel that workloads are unsustainable. The Federation strategic plan speaks of 'developing systems and practices to mitigate the impacts of compliance' (ie relieve workloads) and make Playcentre a more sustainable and accessible option. It also talks about the need to 'improve the ways in which we support and encourage emergent leadership'.

## According to Woodhams Research:

"On average for each centre, volunteers contribute a total of 1300 hours annually for administration, cleaning, meetings, fundraising and working bees (that's in addition to training and time spent on session). A further 879 hours of volunteer time per centre is required to provide Association services to centres." For Auckland Association that equates to an astounding 14,064 hours per year that's 1,758 eight hour days!! What is the figure for your association?

I am struck by the words of the late Gwen Somerset, a Playcentre founder when in 1961 she said:

*"...we need to keep our centres relaxed, welcoming and comfortable, so that both parents and children find friends easily there and are able to say what they feel or play out what they feel."*



She spoke of the need to continue freeing parents of too much responsibility by developing 'uniformity in practices' so they could get on with implementing the 'fine ideals of Playcentres'. And that was in the days before bulk funding and training grants!

### **So what next?**

We are a professional organisation operating in a sophisticated early childhood market where parents have choices and are savvy consumers. Unless anyone has a very wealthy benefactor up their sleeve, it seems that bulk funding, licensing and NZQA qualifications are here to stay – so the work is here to stay. It's time to take a deep breath and get on with the mahi of creating enduring positions, systems and structures that reflect our real workloads. We can ask the Government for more money, but at the end of the day we need to make hard choices about what we value and use our existing money more strategically.

We are at a tipping point in the Auckland Association. Our old ways are no longer sustainable and the mood for change is ripe.

Our mission statement tells us that Playcentre is a place where 'whānau are strengthened and communities enriched', and so we must work to reflect that in our practice by creating environments and systems at centre and association level that will build stronger Playcentres and communities.

At centre level we need to:

- Refocus our families towards nurturing themselves and supporting each other towards spending time educating ourselves alongside our children, and away from non essential and 'compliance' work.
- Allow time and space for robust philosophical discussions ahead of administrative duty.
- Encourage emergent leadership to flourish and grow, and support the natural ebb and flow of energies and efforts within the group.

At association level we need to create structures that ensure elected voluntary positions are focused on governance and strategic work (leadership!). Structures that allow administrative and management functions to be carried out by paid employees in family friendly work environments; where paid positions are remunerated adequately, challenging, meaningful, achievable and personally satisfying.

We certainly don't have all the answers, but Justine and I do have a vision for the future of our association. That vision will unfold as it always has at Playcentre, through vigorous debate and discussion and through innovative ideas gleaned from our grass roots.

So, does this mean the end of emergent leadership in the Auckland Association? Quite the contrary. It means embarking on a journey towards the true spirit of emergent leadership as envisaged over half a century ago by Lex Grey. By once again creating the space and time to nurture grass roots leadership from within, stronger communities of Playcentres will emerge. We will empower parents to strive for a bright and vibrant future for the organisation that we all love so dearly.