



# Early childhood education and care

## Introduction

This policy brief provides an overview of the national policy and advocacy priorities on early childhood education and care. These include:

- access to services for vulnerable and disadvantaged children
- affordability of services for low-income families including fee-relief subsidies such as the Child Care Benefit (CCB) Child Care Rebate and state government subsidies where applicable.
- the importance of high-quality services, particularly for disadvantaged children
- the importance of the training and qualifications of early childhood education and care staff
- the benefits of integrated services which link early childhood education and care with family support services.

## Background

The political, policy and service delivery landscape that surrounds early childhood and care is undergoing significant, rapid and positive change.

This is affecting the way that Australia conceives of and delivers early childhood services. We are now at a time where the existing and long-contested boundaries between 'early childhood education' and 'child care' are blurring.<sup>1</sup>

While there continues to be legislative, policy and funding distinctions between the responsibilities of state and federal governments, the way we refer to the sector is moving towards more generic and inclusive terminology such as 'early childhood education and care' to cover the full range and diversity of service types across Australia such as 'child care' (including long day

care, occasional care, family day care), 'preschool' and 'kindergarten'.<sup>2</sup>

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Since 2007 the Australian Government has taken a lead role in working with state and territory governments on early childhood issues through the COAG's Reform Agenda. Driven by COAG's Productivity Agenda working group, the focus has been on identifying ways to increase Australia's productivity through early childhood development, schooling, skilling and training to overall challenge of labour supply, broader social inclusion and Indigenous reform agendas.

The COAG Productivity Agenda has brought together the traditionally separate jurisdictional areas of 'education', which is a constitutionally a state responsibility, and 'child care', which has been a Commonwealth responsibility.

Almost two years ago, COAG endorsed the National Early Childhood Development Strategy - Investing in the Early Years. The strategy aims to:

... help all levels of government to build a more effective and better coordinated national early childhood development system to support the diverse needs of Australian children and their families. It covers children from before birth to eight years and aims to improve the health, safety, early learning and wellbeing of all children and better support disadvantaged children to reduce inequalities.<sup>3</sup>

The COAG initiatives, including a National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood

Education, represent significant redevelopment of the sector. They encompass a multi-pronged approach to improving access and affordability, the quality and the standards of service delivery of early childhood services.

A range of initiatives sit under the strategy such as:

- Universal access to early childhood education for all four-year-olds in the year prior to starting school with programs to be delivered by a four-year university-trained early childhood teacher, for 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year
- National Quality Framework including the National Quality Standards and the Early Years Learning Framework
- Strengthening the workforce across early childhood development and family support services.
- National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children.

## Context for these reforms

Like any major reform process, there are number of factors which inform the inclusion of 'early childhood development' in COAG's Productivity Agenda. These include:

- the highly compelling 'brain' research that emerged during the 1990s and provided 'hard scientific' evidence that positive and enriching experiences and relationships early in life are essential to healthy brain development.<sup>4</sup>
- the rapid expansion of the private/corporate child care sector, facilitated through the Australian Government's market-based approach to the provision of child care throughout the 1990s and 2000s<sup>5</sup>
- the significant expenditure on child care services through the Child Care Benefit, Child Care Rebate and direct program supports to assist women's workforce participation and the need to ensure that the benefits of this investment are maximised through improved quality of early childhood services for children, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The early childhood education and care sector and the child and family welfare sector strongly supports the objectives of the reforms under the *National Early Childhood Development Strategy* -

*Investing in the Early Years*. Indeed, many would argue that these reforms have been driven by sector advocacy over the last decade or so. Nevertheless, the perennial issues of policy reform – resourcing, consultation, implementation, unintended consequences and Commonwealth/State relations – remain.

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## Policy priorities for early childhood education and care

The following are some of the areas that may require monitoring and/or continued advocacy to ensure that the issues stay on the political agenda and strategies are implemented effectively and appropriately.

### Quality matters

Research shows that high-quality early childhood education and care have the greatest effect on improving children's cognitive, social and emotional developmental outcomes. High-quality early childhood education and care can increase children's wellbeing and learning through play. It can help build the foundations for children's literacy and numeracy, improve social skills and enable early intervention for children with developmental delays that may impact on future life chances.

Research suggests that higher quality services are strongly linked to the qualifications of the staff. One of the strongest examples is the United Kingdom's longitudinal study Effective Provision of Preschool (EPPE) which shows that the quality of early childhood programs increases with the qualifications held by staff members in the program.<sup>6</sup> The EPPE research has found that trained early childhood teachers provide the most direct teaching, are most effective in their interactions with the children, use the most 'sustained shared thinking' and that less qualified staff were significantly better as pedagogues when they worked alongside qualified teachers.

Australia is now placing greater emphasis on early childhood education and care services by

transitioning to require four-year degree-qualified early childhood teachers to deliver preschool programs for all four year olds. At the same, all staff in early childhood services will be required to hold the minimum vocational qualification of a Certificate III in Community Services (Children's Services). The Australia Government has committed additional resources to enable staff and services to meet these goals.

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### **Children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most from Early Childhood Education and Care**

International research shows a strong relationship between cognitive and socio-emotional development and participation in high-quality centre-based care for children from low-income families. Research tells us that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most from early childhood education and care.

The research also shows that quality teaching is required for programs to be successful. The longitudinal study conducted for SureStart on the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education*, for example, found that disadvantaged children benefit significantly from good quality pre-school experiences but make more progress in settings that have staff with higher qualifications.<sup>7</sup>

Though this varies between states and territories, there is general agreement that vulnerable and disadvantaged children in Australia are most likely to miss out on access to early childhood education and care services. However, directing investment to support participation of vulnerable and disadvantaged children in early childhood education and care services stands to be a significant way to make a positive difference in children's learning and development.

### **Universal 'access' for all four years**

As part of the Council of Australian Government (COAG) initiatives for the National Early Childhood Development Strategy, the

Commonwealth Government is introducing a new policy benchmark of providing universal access to 15 hours per week for 41 weeks per year of preschool education of all four year olds. It is important to note that the key word in the commitment is universal 'access'.

The policy does not commit to preschool education being free. A limited number of states already provide free preschool through their education systems. However, some of the larger states in Australia with the greatest population of children do not provide free or even low cost preschool.

### **The benefits of greater integration**

Leading international researchers concur that integrated programs which combine child-focused educational activities with explicit attention to parent-child interactions have the greatest impact and that integrated models are best positioned to engage disadvantaged families and communities.

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children focuses on preventing abuse through early intervention and better integration of child and family services<sup>8</sup>. The strategy emphasises the need to create a universal service platform which provides a non-stigmatised entry point to more intensive support for families with additional needs.

There are now many examples of high-quality integrated service models across Australia. However, at the state and territory level, there have been significant differences in the extent to which governments have recognised the benefits of integrated, co-located child and family services, with the greatest investment in these services in South Australia, Queensland, the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and Tasmania.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore while the policy frameworks seem to support the goal of increased integration of services, a strong focus on ensuring further investment and that the models are appropriate for individual communities and well-evaluated is a priority.

### **Access to inclusive services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders**

As stated above, access to high-quality early childhood education programs enhance children's readiness for school particularly for disadvantaged children. A recent report by the

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs comments that without preschool learning opportunities, Indigenous students are likely to be behind from their first year of formal schooling<sup>10</sup>. However, data from the 2006 Census indicates that 49.2% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander three and four year olds were not enrolled in preschool education in 2006<sup>11</sup>.

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The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) suggests, increasing levels of participation in ECEC services by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children requires services to be affordable, accessible and culturally appropriate<sup>12</sup>.

Given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families use both Indigenous specific and non-Indigenous specific children's services, mainstream services need to demonstrate a commitment to developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competence and providing culturally appropriate programs for children.

### **The role of early childhood services in helping address the barriers for jobless families entering the workforce**

The Social Inclusion Board's recently released report on Addressing Barriers for Jobless Families notes that the majority of jobless families were headed by single mothers and 51% of all persistently jobless families (jobless for a period of three or more years) had a child aged six years or younger. Amongst its recommendations, the Board highlighted the role of playgroups and early childhood services as a soft-entry point into other services and that they can also enhance families' connection to their community.

Significantly, the Board also recommended that the Commonwealth and State Governments consolidate and increase child care subsidies in line with the recommendations of the Henry Tax Review so that child care subsidies cover at least 90% of child care costs for low-income families.

Further, in recognition of the role that high quality child care can play in supporting the development of disadvantaged children, the Henry Review recommended, and the Board supports, the Commonwealth Government subsidising the full cost of child care for children whose parents remain jobless.

### **Government subsidies to reduce the cost of services to families**

Australia has a number of subsidies that eligible families can receive to assist with the cost of child care. Generally, eligibility requirements are based on meeting the work, training, study test.

There are two primary supports that are offered by the Australian Government:

- The **Child Care Benefit** which assists families that use Commonwealth Approved Child Care Providers such as long day care, family day care, occasional care, outside school hours care, vacation care with the costs of child care. Families using Registered Care Providers such as preschools, kindergartens, some outside school hours care services and some occasional care centres, grandparents or other relatives, friends or nannies, who are registered as carers with the Australian Government, can also access to the Child Care Benefit but the method of lodging claims is different.
- The **Child Care Rebate** which assists parents or guardians with out-of-pocket expenses for approved child care if you are working, training or studying. In addition, states and territories may also provide funding to preschools and kindergarten to reduce the fees for low income and/or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Preschool education is also provided free of charge in some states and territories.

Reviews of the tax and transfer system, such as the recent Henry Tax Review, have identified the complexity of the current arrangements. There are also significant questions about whether the Child Care Rebate directs government resources to those most in need. This is because while the Child Care Benefit is fully means tested, the Child Care Rebate, which was introduced after the 2004 Federal Election, is not. It is widely agreed that the Child Care Rebate benefits higher income earners and is often labelled as a form of 'middle class welfare'.

## Opportunities for future policy and advocacy

Given the scope of the reform agenda for the early childhood education and care sector, there are number of areas that merit ongoing policy analysis and advocacy.

These include:

- The quality of early childhood education and care services – for example ensuring that the benefits of these services are maximised for vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
- Access for all four years to preschool in the year prior to starting school – for example identifying the barriers to achieving this and pursuing a broader goal for disadvantaged and vulnerable children to access preschool prior to turning four.
- Strengthening the policy agenda on integrated services – for example monitoring evaluations, highlighting good practice and models that work.
- Increasing access to services (both mainstream and Aboriginal-specific) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children - for example addressing barriers to increase participation such as strengthening cultural inclusiveness of mainstream services, increasing access to transport and supporting the transition to formal school.
- The role of early childhood services in supporting the transition to education and employment for jobless families and other target groups under the new welfare reform measures such as young mothers and single parents.
- The need to review the government financial supports such as the Child Care Rebate to reduce the cost of early childhood services.

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent comprehensive overview see *Early Childhood Australia (ECA) report: Our future on the line: Keeping the early childhood education and care reforms on track* [http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/pdf/our\\_future\\_on\\_the\\_line.pdf](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/pdf/our_future_on_the_line.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that an alternative term 'children's services' is often used to ensure inclusion of 'out of school hours care' which provides services to school age children 5-12 years whereas early childhood education and care generally focuses on the birth to five years or birth eight years age groups.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.deewr.gov.au/earlychildhood/policy\\_agenda/pages/earlychildhooddevelopmentstrategy.aspx](http://www.deewr.gov.au/earlychildhood/policy_agenda/pages/earlychildhooddevelopmentstrategy.aspx) accessed 19 May 2011

<sup>3</sup> Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, Eds, *The Science of Early Childhood Development*, NATIONAL ACADEMY PRESS, Washington, D.C. 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, Eds, *The Science of Early Childhood Development*, NATIONAL ACADEMY PRESS, Washington, D.C. 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Today the majority of Commonwealth Approved Child Care Providers, in spite of the spectacular collapse of the ABC Learning, are private providers (small business or child care chains). The not-for-profit sector continues to provide around a third of all services.

<sup>6</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. 2004, *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report A Longitudinal Study 1997-2004*, The Institute of Education, London.

<sup>7</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Blatchford, I S., Taggart, B. and Elliot, K., 2003, *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from the Pre-school Period*, Institute of Education, University of London.

<sup>8</sup> *Protecting Children is Everyone's Business, National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, [www.coag.gov.au/coag\\_meeting\\_outcomes/2009-04-30/docs/child\\_protection\\_framework.pdf](http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2009-04-30/docs/child_protection_framework.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> CSDMAC (Community and Disability Services Ministers' Advisory Council) 2009, *A strategic assessment of the children's services industry*, Adelaide.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008, *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage: the challenge for Australia*, [www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/general/documents/closing\\_the\\_gap/p2.htm](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/general/documents/closing_the_gap/p2.htm)

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Kronemann, M., 2008, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and the national early childhood agenda*, For Dusseldorp Skills Forum.

<sup>12</sup> Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, 2009, *Submission on the Consultation Regulation Impact Statement for Early Childhood Education and Care Reforms*, [www.snaicc.asn.au/\\_uploads/rsfil/00321.pdf](http://www.snaicc.asn.au/_uploads/rsfil/00321.pdf)