



ANNIE DENNIS CHILDREN'S CENTRE INC.  
2 Oldis Avenue Northcote 3070  
Telephone 9486 7638/9486 7639  
Fax 9481 1096  
E-mail [info@anniedennis.org.au](mailto:info@anniedennis.org.au)  
Website [www.anniedennis.org.au](http://www.anniedennis.org.au)  
Registered Inc. Assn. No. A0012792Z

## **Submission for the Childcare and Early Childhood Learning public inquiry**

### **1. About us**

The Annie Dennis Children's Centre is a council-owned, community-run childcare centre and kindergarten, established in 1929 and located in Northcote, Victoria. We provide education and care for children aged 6 months to 6 years, as well as pre-kinder and kindergarten educational programs. We pride ourselves on our strong commitment to quality childcare and early childhood education. Further information about the Centre is available on our website: <http://www.anniedennis.org.au/>

The Centre provides a caring, safe and stimulating environment that nurtures every aspect of the child. At Annie Dennis the children are respected as individuals and independent thinkers, staff are role models and advocates both for the young children and their profession, and parents and families are an integral part of the learning community.

Annie Dennis is a not-for-profit organisation funded by fees and relevant local State and Federal Government funding. It is managed by a committee of parents and early childhood educators and employs a full-time Centre Manager.

We aim to operate early childhood education and care services which are:

- Community managed – to ensure that decisions about the way in which services are run will be made through a management structure involving a majority of parents and educators;
- Culturally relevant – to ensure that the services reflect, accommodate and reinforce the different cultural backgrounds of the families using them, including indigenous cultures near and far;
- Flexible – to ensure that the services cater for care and educational needs of children in the City of Darebin and respect, encourage, celebrate the individual diversity of each child; and
- Network developing – to ensure that the services assist in developing strong community networks, encouraging families to work in partnership with us and fostering positive connections with the wider community

### **2. Purpose of our submission**

We are responding to the Early Childhood Learning element of the Productivity Commission, with the aim of making comment in relation to the following elements of the *Scope of the Inquiry* about which the Commission will make recommendations:

- The contribution that access to affordable, high quality child care can make to optimising children's learning and development (Scope of the Inquiry 1b)
- Accessibility of affordable care (2c)

- The capacity of the existing child care system to ensure children are transitioning from child care to school with a satisfactory level of school preparedness (2i)
- The needs of vulnerable or at risk children (2k)
- The benefits and other impacts of regulatory changes in child care over the past decade, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in States and Territories, with specific consideration given to compliance costs, taking into account the Government's planned work with States and Territories to streamline the NQF (5)

### **3. Evidence**

Our submission draws on our decades of experience as a high quality long day care and kindergarten provider, as well as from the work of Early Childhood Australia and The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH).

### **4. Submission on key issues**

#### ***4.1 The contribution that access to affordable, high quality child care can make to optimising children's learning and development***

##### **4.1.1 Putting children first**

We believe:

- that the emotional and physical safety of each child is fundamental to security whilst at the centre
- children's self esteem and sense of belonging are vital to their continuing growth and development
- children feel secure in an environment which is consistent, flexible, and respects their individual needs
- it is healthy for children to freely express and experience their emotions
- children have a right to be involved in decision making, they need time and opportunities to develop their own ideas, and form their own opinions
- children need opportunities to develop positive relationships with adults and peers
- children are intrinsically motivated to learn through play and exploration
- children need to know that cultural diversity is valued, respected, encouraged and celebrated, and
- the connection between the child and home is vital in creating positive relationships with all families.

The best interests of children and their families should be at the centre of every early childhood service. While components of the system have developed over time to meet the needs of other stakeholders (such as employers, service providers and government administrators) the test of 'is this in the best interests of children?' should be applied because that will yield more significant long-term benefits to our society and our economy.

COAG's 2009 'Investing in the Early Years - A National Early Childhood Development Strategy' included the vision that by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation' which should continue to be the touchstone of all decisions relating to the delivery of children's services.

##### **4.1.2 Optimising children's learning and development**

We believe:

- children are spontaneous and learn through flexible educational programs
- the educational environment is a teacher...and should be cared for and respected

- natural resources give children an understanding and respect for the environment
- children need hands on experiences to connect with and build an awareness of their environment and the world around them
- children learn best when offered open-ended materials, ample time and the opportunity to investigate, imagine, dream, hypothesise, problem solve, transform and invent
- children's day-to-day learning is enhanced through the active involvement in caring for centre pets
- in enhancing a positive connection and working collaboratively with diverse organisations, and
- in sharing the responsibility towards environmental sustainable practices and learning experiences.

The importance of early childhood is substantiated by decades of accumulated evidence which provides strong support for the importance of the early years (i.e. the first five years of life) (Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2010; Field, 2010; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Shonkoff et al., 2009). Ensuring the capacity of individuals to participate in economic, social and civic life will help Australia fulfill valuable social and economic goals such as a reduction in long-term unemployment and the promotion of social engagement.

High-quality ECEC programs have a positive impact on the health, learning, development and wellbeing of participating children (Centre for Community Child Health, 2013). The importance of investing in young children and their families – and the economic benefits of doing so – is similarly supported by the evidence (see Heckman et al, 2000; 2006a; 2006b; 2008a; 2008b 2013).

Early childhood education and care services are not places where children are simply 'looked after' and/or 'educated.' ECEC services are part of a broader service system that have a critical role to play in supporting families of young children. The needs of children cannot be separated from the needs of their families as children – especially young children – are profoundly influenced by their families and the family environment. If their family is doing well, then it is more likely that a child will be doing well and vice versa. For this reason, we believe that the role of ECEC services as part of the community, working collaboratively with families and other organisations to support child development, should be supported.

#### **4.1.3 Attracting and retaining skilled staff to deliver quality services**

We believe:

- in teaching children to uphold their rights
- demonstrating warmth and empathy towards all children
- in being advocates for young children and families, early childhood services and our profession
- in being positive role models for the children and each other.
- learning is a shared active process between children, families and early childhood educators
- that ongoing professional development is vital to implement quality practices
- in order for the children to reach their full potential we need to work in partnership with children and families, and
- by acknowledging each other's diversity and uniqueness we create a positive learning environment.

Attracting and retaining qualified and professional educators is the key to quality service delivery, so the introduction of professional wages is urgently required. The relationships between educators and children is a critical component of quality in service delivery.

Being an early childhood educator should be a valued and respected role. We trust them with the safety and education of our most valuable and vulnerable citizens. We should therefore be aiming to attract the very best, talented and committed staff, and have the capacity to retain them to form ongoing stable relationships with the children in our service.

Despite wide acknowledgment of the importance of this issue, educators continue to be poorly paid for the work they do. At Annie Dennis Children's Centre we cannot afford to increase our educators' pay rates without reducing accessibility for our families. Addressing their low wages is key to completing the quality reform agenda.

In addition, we need more assistance to increase the supply of qualified practitioners, and to create career pathways to talented and committed staff. We support the *Early Years Workforce Strategy*.

Every person who interacts with a child, regardless of their professional background, needs to know how to attend to and meet that child's care and learning needs. Therefore training is critical for all professionals who work with young children (CCCH, 2007).

An investment in the ECEC workforce will have cost implications, however the cost of *not* improving the quality of ECEC will potentially be poorer outcomes for children during the early years (and almost certainly, poorer outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds), subsequently leading to poorer outcomes in the long term and greater costs – both socially and economically – for Australia.

#### **4.1.4 Staff to child ratios and child outcomes**

Lower staff-to-child ratios and higher staff qualifications are associated with better outcomes for children in early childhood education and care and ensures each child gets more individual care and attention. For this reason, Annie Dennis Children's Centre offers a lower staff-to-child ratio than is currently mandated.

Ideally the cost implications of improving staff ratios and staff qualifications should not be borne by families.

#### **4.2 The capacity of the existing child care system to ensure children are transitioning from child care to school with a satisfactory level of school preparedness**

High quality early childhood education and care plays a key role in narrowing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children upon school entry (Centre for Community Child Health, 2013).

Ensuring children are ready for school should be fundamental to the early childhood service system. We know that the early years lay important foundations for future success at school. For example, we know that the building blocks for literacy are established long before a child reaches school. In international studies, sharing stories, rhymes and songs with babies and toddlers has been shown to have a significant positive impact on their vocabulary, communication, reading and writing skills (Jump, 2009; CCCH, 2013).

Funding for commitment to universal access to high-quality preschool programs must be continued to achieve school readiness. Where possible, the funding should improve the integration of preschool programs with long day care services.

#### **4.3 The accessibility of affordable care**

While improvements can be made to existing programs within the current funding parameters, the key challenges facing the sector to improve access to quality, affordable care require increased government investment.

A 'trade off' between affordability and quality ECEC is a 'lose-lose' proposal for vulnerable families and children: if it's too expensive, families will not be able to use it; if it's poor quality, children will experience poor outcomes. Either way, vulnerable children will miss out.

#### **4.4 The needs of vulnerable children**

Vulnerable children need high quality early childhood education and care more than other children because they are less likely to receive the opportunities they need in the other environments where they grow up.

Affordable ECEC is important for families – especially vulnerable families. Every effort should be made to ensure disadvantaged families are protected from additional costs emerging from improvements to staff ratios and staff qualifications because if they are not, the negative economic and social costs for Australia could be significant.

All children are influenced by the quality of the care and education they experience, however children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit more from high quality ECEC than other children (Centre for Community Child Health, 2013).

Further, the Inclusion Support Subsidy is not sufficient to meet the needs of children with complex needs in early childhood services, yet this early intervention support is most needed during the important early years. An improved funding formula which recognises the cost of employing inclusion support staff must be considered.

#### ***4.5 The benefits and other impacts of regulatory changes in child care over the past decade, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in States and Territories, with specific consideration given to compliance costs, taking into account the Government's planned work with States and Territories to streamline the NQF***

The government has a key role to play in ensuring all early childhood education and care services are providing high quality care to young children.

We support the National Quality Agenda and the National Quality Standard system of quality assurance, because we understand the direct connection between the quality of early childhood services and positive long term outcomes for children. The National Quality Framework provides a solid foundation for government to ensure ECEC services are providing high quality care to children (CCCH, 2013).

Committee of Management  
Annie Dennis Children's Centre