

Submission to the Australian Government inquiry into future options for childcare and early childhood learning.

Canning Vale Prekindy is a Short Sessional Care and Education service that caters for families with varying circumstances who require an affordable high quality early childhood education and care environment to support their children's growth and learning, and the transition to school.

Our contribution to this inquiry focuses on three main issues:

- 1. High quality sessional prekindy services are able to offer an environment which optimises the learning and development of children in the early years for many families in the Western Australian community, supporting the home learning environment and extended family care arrangements, and providing a smooth transition to school. School in Western Australia begins with kindergarten – the year children turn four/five years old.**
- 2. Sessional prekindy services meet the needs of certain families and children that are not well met by other types of services. They represent choice for families.**
- 3. With appropriate funding support, sessional prekindy services are able to identify and support the needs of vulnerable children and children with extra needs. Many of these children would not attend other types of education and care programs, and their particular needs would not be identified or attended to until they started school.**

Canning Vale Prekindy is a community based, not-for-profit sessional early childhood service offering an early learning program for children in the year prior to starting kindergarten.

The prekindy was started in 2008 by a group of enthusiastic parents and community members at the urging of parents in the community who were looking for a high quality early learning program for their three-four years old but who were, for a variety of reasons, looking for an alternative to long day care and family day care services. Prekindy programs have emerged all over Perth for the same reason.

Currently prekindy services in Western Australia are predominantly self-funded. Despite being in scope of the National Quality Framework prekindies do not meet the criteria for approval by the Australian Government for Child Care Benefit (CCB) purposes. This is only because they are sessional services (and therefore unable to meet the opening hours requirements), not because they do not provide a high quality program. We work to keep our fees as low as possible without compromising on the quality of the program we provide, but they are still out of reach for many families who would choose this type of service as the best option for their children.

Our parents are well aware of the importance of the early years in their children's development and that developing skills such as resilience, confidence in a group, independence and a love for learning are paramount to meeting the challenges of school. They know that access to a high quality early learning environment staffed by highly qualified educators will support the great work they are already doing at home with their children and that these two things combined will enable their children to contribute constructively to the future social, economic and political life of society.

Parents looking for prekindy for their children are doing so for varied reasons:

- Many have chosen a combination of extended family care or nanny care and an early learning environment for their young children while they work. Some of these families have at least one parent who works away (FIFO) and so care is not needed every week. These families need the flexibility of extended family care combined with the consistency of a sessional early learning environment to meet the needs of their children.
- Some are socially isolated either because they have recently migrated or because they have limited English. They enrol their children in prekindy to expose them to the English language in a consistent and settled environment, where they can also make social connections and find support themselves.
- We have a large number of FIFO families who require particular support and a consistent and predictable environment for their children. The prekindy model is able to provide this.
- We are often approached by parents of children with special needs looking for a settled consistent learning environment for their child – looking for the same opportunities and options other children have.
- Many of our families are new to Australia and do not speak English at home.
- We have also had many inquiries from foster parents who would prefer to choose a prekindy service for their foster child.

Our parents have been very clear about their reasons for wanting a prekindy service and what they believe it provides that they do not feel is provided by other care and education options available in Western Australia:-

- Set times so children arrive together and leave together rather than the constant coming and going of the day care environment. Parents feel this develops a sense of community, is a more settled environment, allows continuity of the program for children and enables families to make connections with each other and develop support networks.
- Consistent staff - so children have the same educators for each session they attend, from the beginning to the end of each session, which creates a stable environment and a sense of consistency.
- Highly qualified educators, including an early childhood teacher with specialist knowledge and experience in working with young children
- A smaller, more personal environment than a school or long day care centre
- A gentle transition to school - an environment that provides a consistent routine but a program that values play and is flexible and responsive.
- The same children each day, giving children the opportunity to learn skills to interact and collaborate with others and develop friendships in a more consistent environment.
- The right to choose a half-day service and only pay for half a day (child care services charge a full day regardless of the time the child attends for that day).
- The ability to choose regular days and times that are not altered by the service to accommodate those higher up on the priority of access list.

Over the years it has been operating, our prekindy service has been able to identify where children who attend our program may need help from specialist services such as speech, hearing, occupational therapy and early intervention. In many cases parents were unaware that their child was having difficulties in these areas and would not have otherwise sought help or advice. These

issues would not have been identified until the children attended school at four years of age, resulting in a delay in their learning.

Our location in a community centre means that we interact with other health and family support services. We liaise with these services and the local school to meet the needs of children and families and to further support parents in their parenting role. We are also able to provide parents with information and resources to build their confidence and their ability to create a rich home learning environment for their children.

However, because prekindy services like ours do not meet the criteria for Approved Care for the purpose of CCB we are hindered in our ability to provide for many families who would otherwise choose our service.

- Many families simply cannot afford the unsubsidised fee.
- In addition, because we are not considered Approved Care, we are unable to access support services for children with special needs or children of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds and must pay a considerably higher registration fee for the few professional development services we can access.

The Western Australian government has recognised the significant input of prekindy programs into the early education and care of young children and consequently has put them in scope of the National Quality Framework. We strive to meet the same quality standards with considerable disadvantage. Considering this we would ask that families are supported to choose the early learning environment they consider best meets the needs of their child by ensuring equal access to CCB and support services.