



A Good Beginning
for Every Child

Productivity Commission Issue Paper: Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

Good Beginnings Australia Response

10th February 2014



Productivity Commission Issue Paper: Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

TERMS OF REFERENCE

- 1) The contribution that access to affordable, high quality child care can make to:
 - a) increased participation in the workforce, particularly for women
 - b) optimising children's learning and development.
- 2) The current and future need for child care in Australia, including consideration of the following:
 - a) hours parents work or study, or wish to work or study
 - b) the particular needs of rural, regional and remote parents, as well as shift workers
 - c) accessibility of affordable care
 - d) types of child care available including but not limited to: long day care, family day care, in home care including nannies and au pairs, mobile care, occasional care, and outside school hours care
 - e) the role and potential for employer provided child care
 - f) usual hours of operation of each type of care
 - g) the out of pocket cost of child care to families
 - h) rebates and subsidies available for each type of care
 - i) 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
 - j) opportunities to improve connections and transitions across early childhood services (including between child care and preschool/kindergarten services)
 - k) the needs of vulnerable or at risk children
 - l) interactions with relevant Australian Government policies and programmes.
- 3) Whether there are any specific models of care that should be considered for trial or implementation in Australia, with consideration given to international models, such as the home based care model in New Zealand and models that specifically target vulnerable or at risk children and their families.
- 4) Options for enhancing the choices available to Australian families as to how they receive child care support, so that this can occur in the manner most suitable to their individual family circumstances. Mechanisms to be considered include subsidies, rebates and tax deductions, to improve the accessibility, flexibility and affordability of child care for families facing diverse individual circumstances.
- 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.
- 6) In making any recommendations for future Australian Government policy settings, the Commission will consider options within current funding parameters.

Recommendations:

- *Maintain a strong focus on the quality of all ECEC services regardless of service type;*
- *Government should retain a significant role and investment in ECEC services and the NQF;*
- *Ensure access to ECEC services for those who need it most by improving and simplifying subsidies that support participation;*
- *The Federal Government should have a continued role in leading and coordinating efforts to improve quality, accessibility and affordability of ECEC services;*
- *Support providers to provide more flexible and responsive services where viability is a concern;*
- *Ensure that access to these services remains accessible and affordable;*
- *Explore models that support parent and child participation by wrapping ECEC services around starting school;*
- *Develop a common outcomes framework for all children and youth, building on established work programs and alliances.*

Introduction

Good Beginnings is a national organisation that provides early intervention and parenting support programs across every State and Territory in Australia. Good Beginnings does not provide Childcare, rather focussing on supporting parents and carers in their parenting role. Good Beginnings' response to the Productivity Commission's Issue Paper on Childcare and Early Childhood Learning draws on service delivery experience, work in partnership and extensive knowledge of the communities in which it works. In particular Good Beginnings can provide a unique position due to its national positioning and understanding of the challenges at each State and Territory level.

Good Beginnings would like to acknowledge collaboration with a group of organisation brought together by ACOSS in preparation of this submission and, while this is an individual organisational submission, support the principle agreed on in this group: that subsidies be targeted progressively at low-income earners. In addition Good Beginnings sees universal delivery and early intervention approaches key to preventing families experiencing vulnerabilities and risk becoming disadvantaged. Also key to Good Beginnings' approach is a strong focus on outcomes and genuine community engagement in meeting the needs of children and families.

General comments about the study

In responding to this Issue Paper, Good Beginnings' greatest concern is for ensuring that **high quality, accessible and affordable** services are available for **all** children and families.

The scope of the review covers a wide and diverse range of issues. Good Beginnings notes that many of the issues in scope for this study relating to defining the evidence base, features and demand for different services types have been, in-part, addressed through the 2011 Productivity Commission *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*, and would refer to this study. The inclusion of multiple types of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) within the scope of the current study is promising—it is consistent with the approach of the National Quality Framework (NQF) applying quality principles across service types—and concerning—while framed as inclusive of multiple ECEC services, childcare is consistently differentiated from 'education'. It is imperative that efforts focus on the quality of *all* ECEC services and integrate the care and education of children regardless of service type.

The Issues Paper, in describing the scope for this study, raises the question of what roles different levels of government should play in 'childcare and early childhood education'. Good Beginnings believes that the role of government in ECEC services should remain a significant priority and investment **area**. The National Quality Reform Agenda has gained significant ground in improving structures to support quality ECEC services through a NQF that brings traditionally separate 'care' and 'education' services closer together. There is however more ground to cover in relation to continuing to improve quality and simplifying access to supports and subsidy systems that enable participation.

A key role for the federal government is ensuring that high quality ECEC services are available and sustained for children who both need and will benefit from them the most. In particular there is a role for government in ensuring that children who are at the greatest risk of developmental or material disadvantage are best serviced and have easy to navigate access to the highest quality service that can be offered. Another key role for the federal government is to continue to lead and coordinate, with states and territories, efforts to reform and improve the quality, accessibility and affordability of ECEC services consistently across all states.

All children should have **access to affordable** and the **highest quality** ECEC services available.

Recommendations:

- *Maintain a strong focus on the quality of all ECEC services regardless of service type;*
- *Government should retain a significant role and investment in ECEC services and the NQF;*
- *Ensure access to ECEC services for those who need it most by improving and simplifying subsidies that support participation; and*
- *The Federal Government should have a continued role in leading and coordinating efforts to improve quality, accessibility and affordability of ECEC services.*

TOR 1: The contribution that access to affordable, high quality child care can make to:

- a) increased participation in the workforce, particularly for women**
- b) optimising children's learning and development.**

ECEC services have the potential to make a significant impact to both workforce participation and to 'optimising children's learning and development'.

Optimising children's learning and development

High quality ECEC services provide children with the conditions in which to establish the foundations for future learning and development while also providing important opportunities and experiences where children can enact their rights to participate. High quality ECEC services are known to be beneficial for children's learning, development and future success. Further, accessing ECEC services becomes a matter of children's rights: to participate and succeed. This is particularly important for children and families who don't traditionally participate in ECEC services given that evidence suggest that experience in childhood can address later adversity.¹ Children with quality early childhood experiences performed better academically than those without, regardless of socio-economic or contextual issues;² and it is well documented that early experience, both positive and negative, has significant impacts of future learning, development and wellbeing.^{3 4}

Ensuring that all ECEC services are held to the same quality standards is a step towards ensuring that the 'service type' does not impact children's learning, development and preparedness for school. High quality ECEC services share the following common features: Ratios; Qualifications; and Interactions (REF: Prod Commission ECD workforce, 2011). High quality services, that are embedded and engaged in their community and service network, are even better equipped to meet the needs of children and families. While not all ECEC services offer the same type or structure of service, with consistent quality standards and assurances, families will have the freedom to choose the ECEC service that best suits their circumstance without making 'trade-offs' when it comes to quality and outcomes for children.

Increased participation in the workforce, particularly for women

Access to high quality ECEC services is imperative to support workforce and community participation. Good Beginnings firmly believes that children deserve access to the highest quality service and that the 'relative importance' of affordability and quality for example should not limit the level of quality that children have access to. In circumstance where the cost of quality services is prohibitive, particularly in regional and remote areas, alternative funding models should be explored to ensure that the minimum standard for ECEC services is both high quality and accessible.

¹ Heckman, J. 2008, The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children, *Big Ideas for Children: Investing in Our Nation's Future*, First Focus.

² SNAICC, 2010, Highlights of Research Findings from Abecedarian Studies By: Dr Joseph Sparling, *SNAICC National Conference*, SNAICC, Melbourne.

³ Centre for Community Child Health, 2006, Early Childhood and the Life Course, *Policy Brief: Translating research evidence to inform policy and practice (1)*, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

⁴ Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2010, *The Foundations of Lifelong Health Are Built in Early Childhood*, National Scientific Council on the Developing Child and National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs.

TOR 2: The current and future need for child care in Australia, including consideration of the following:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) hours parents work or study, or wish to work or study b) the particular needs of rural, regional and remote parents, as well as shift workers c) accessibility of affordable care d) types of child care available including but not limited to: long day care, family day care, in home care including nannies and au pairs, mobile care, occasional care, and outside school hours care e) the role and potential for employer provided child care f) usual hours of operation of each type of care g) the out of pocket cost of child care to families | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> h) rebates and subsidies available for each type of care i) 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 j) opportunities to improve connections and transitions across early childhood services (including between child care and preschool/kindergarten services) k) the needs of vulnerable or at risk children l) interactions with relevant Australian Government policies and programmes. |
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Contemporary ECEC services continue to struggle to reflect the diverse participation experiences, or requirements, of families in Australia, for example: casual, unstable or infrequent work; shift work; and accessing family support and parenting services. Responding to this ad hoc nature of service usage is often unviable for many providers; additional supports are required to address service viability concerns to ensure that flexible provision can be offered in an affordable and accessible way. There has been some anecdotal comment that recent proposed changes to work for the dole structures may disproportionately impact women due to limited access to care that would both enable participation in work for the dole or paid employment.

Recommendations:

- *Support providers to provide more flexible and responsive services where viability is a concern;*
- *Ensure that access to these services remains accessible and affordable.*

School transitions are an important and stressful time for children and families. The ECEC sector is well placed to assist children and families to prepare for this transition. This is a particularly challenging time for families balancing workforce participation demands around these times. Many schools operate at reduced hours when children first start school—this provides a challenge when considering care demands for children, often in the context ceasing attendance at ECEC services. It may be beneficial, for children and families, to explore models that wrap ECEC services around the first weeks of formal schooling to support children in their transition and families to manage workforce participation demands. It is important to reinforce that this is a role that can, and should, be played by all ECEC services—not just formal preschool and kindergarten programs. An example of such a model is the Good Beginnings program in Elizabeth Grove, SA (formerly known as TAP).

The most accessible place and often the first point of call for families experiencing difficulties is the local school. The TAP program aims to strengthen community capacity to support families by developing the school as the ‘hub’ of the community from which parents can connect with and gain access to a range of community support services. This ‘hub and spoke’ model of operation has the potential to provide a comprehensive system of seamless supports and access to early intervention for families in need. (source, TAP evaluation, 2005)

In Good Beginnings experience, effective transition to school programs over a period of at least two school terms provides for a more effective start to school, particularly for children in vulnerable communities.

Recommendation

- *Explore models that support parent and child participation by wrapping ECEC services around starting school*

In considering flexibility of children's services a variety of models and service types may be required. Ensuring high quality, accessibility and availability of services, to ensure high standards in ECEC are met and outcomes for children and families delivered, will be more important than the type of ECEC service or setting. That is: If ECEC services are to be provided by employers then the same quality and regulatory conditions and expectations should be met; if nannies and au pairs are in scope for subsidy and rebate then both quality and regulatory conditions should be in place along with efforts to ensure that accessibility and affordability conditions are provided for.

When considering access for the most vulnerable children consideration needs to be given to the impact of navigating multiple subsidies and rebates. While a combination of child care benefit and childcare rebate assist some concerns relating to access, navigating these systems and understanding entitlements often acts as a barrier. There is a need to review and simplify access to these subsidies and rebates either through direct service funding—to reduce the out of pocket expense—or through more streamlined processes to determine level of benefit. There is also potential for greater use and better application of Special Child Care Benefit to support families experiencing difficult circumstances. Good Beginnings hears feedback that rigidly applied criteria often results in waiting times for families to access services that they desperately need, for example families at risk are ineligible for SCCB support. There is also potential to expand the criteria to support families to access programs and family support to improve their situations. Program criteria could determine SCCB eligibility so that families attending specified programs are automatically eligible for benefit; a starting point for this could be those participating in the Department of Social Services Family Support Program or similar programs.

As previously stated, a focus on high quality across service types will ensure that children's learning and care needs are met, regardless of service type. While much effort has been put into implementing consistent standards across the ECEC sector there is still community concerns and a perception that one service type is superior to another.

Quote from a Good Beginnings worker:

Parents always ask me if I should remove my child from childcare to attend a [preschool/kindergarten] program. The message that I reinforce is that when making the choice consider the quality of the service rather than the service type. Often parents choose to swap to [preschool/kindergarten] because of the subsidies available, even though their child is settled in a quality child care program.

A sector that supports both children's development and parent/carer workforce participation needs to acknowledge that quality provision is required across the board to ensure that children's learning and development needs are met.

TOR 3: Whether there are any specific models of care that should be considered for trial or implementation in Australia, with consideration given to international models, such as the home based care model in New Zealand and models that specifically target vulnerable or at risk children and their families.

There is evidence to suggest that integrated models of child and family services, that involve adult and child focussed services and that target families who need it the most, have promising impacts for children and families,⁵ particularly when coupled with a focus on quality practices.⁶ Flexible and responsive services, that meet a range of family needs, provide additional opportunities that enable and sustain participation. This enables better engagement of families in Children's learning and development and offers opportunities to intervene earlier when family need presents.

Further, services that integrate the care and education of children have been shown to have positive impacts on child outcomes.^{7 8} Services that integrate early childhood education and care for children are characterised by interwoven approaches to education and care rather than focussing on separate service types or structure.

Another important element that will be elaborated further below is a focus on shared and consistent outcomes for children and families. This acknowledges the differing roles and approaches that different services will take, while ensuring that these approaches are unified under a shared focus.

⁵ Centre for Community Child Health, 2009, Integrating Services for young children and their families, *Policy Brief: Translating research evidence to inform policy and practice (17)*, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

⁶ Sims, M. 2010, A Vision for Integrated Early Childhood Service Delivery, *Building Integrated Connections for Children, their Families and Communities*, pp 86-101, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle upon Tyne.

⁷ Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Siraj-Blatchford, J. 2010, *Improving developmental outcomes for children through effective practice in integrating early years services*, Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services, London.

⁸ Centre for Community Child Health, 2007, Early Years Care and Education, *Policy Brief: Translating research evidence to inform policy and practice (8)*, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

TOR 4: Options for enhancing the choices available to Australian families as to how they receive child care support, so that this can occur in the manner most suitable to their individual family circumstances. Mechanisms to be considered include subsidies, rebates and tax deductions, to improve the accessibility, flexibility and affordability of child care for families facing diverse individual circumstances.

There is a need to consider flexibility of parent payments in the context of how carers, particularly informal carers, are recognised and supported. There is a role for ECEC services, potentially in being a source of 'respite' for carers. Below outlines a commentary from a Family Support Worker in the Northern Territory who, in her role, often works to support grandparent carers, this provides a context for some of the flexibility and consideration required:

In Aboriginal communities in this region often grandparents take on significant roles in caring for their grandchildren. Parents often retain Centrelink benefits linked to the children and so this is done on minimum income. There is often an expectation amongst community that grandparents will support their children with caring for grandchildren. This is not necessarily seen as a burden by grandparents. However, in some cases when parents leave their children with grandparents for extended periods without any financial support this becomes burdensome.

Often grandparents are the strong, protective people for children. This could be utilised more by support services, such as education, in order to achieve outcomes for children. Often messages of agencies are given to parents and this information is not clearly communicated to the child's extended supports who may be the ones actively supporting children.

Increased complexity occurs when children are the subject of intervention by child protection services, where the parents, rather than grandparents, are treated as the primary contact.

There are significant opportunities for flexibility in ECEC programs to provide support that could enable stable family relationships to be maintained.

TOR 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.

Good Beginnings, through experience, has a strong appreciation for the benefits of work-based training and mentoring particularly to attract broad representation in roles working with families. As such Good Beginnings sees a place for competency-based assessment, when it is used as a strategy to engage recruits in formal training or is coupled with formal training opportunities. In the ECEC sector it is important that increasing qualification levels strikes the right balance between assessing competency and improving the skill level within the profession. High educator-to-child ratios are also imperative to ensuring quality.

The positive or negative impact that early experience can have on children should be considered as the most important determinant when considering regulatory and assessment frameworks for quality. The negative impacts are too severe and the positive impacts present too great an opportunity to back away from a comprehensive quality assessment process. The risk of cutting costs of, or relaxing the regulation and quality assurances processes of ECEC services, that host the future potential of the country, is too high a price in relation to any savings achieved.

Greater supports are required to ensure access and affordability of high quality services. Better supports to integrate 15 hours of universal access into LDC settings, 15 hours can equate to up to 3 days of sessional preschool or kindergarten, whereas it equates to only one and a half days of a LDC program. Options that enable access to high quality education [and care] programs within LDC settings should be explored to increase access without complicating or increasing costs for families. This is particularly important in the context of some states offering subsidised or free kindergarten and preschool programs. Structures that enable families to access a combination of State and Federal subsidies are required to ensure that families are supported to make the right choice for their family. This may require that funding be directed to ECEC services to ensure easy access, that is, based on achieving and maintaining quality standards.

Key to achieving outcomes for children and families is flexibility for individual family circumstances and regional needs. There is an overlap between employment services and outcomes for children. This case study provides further context:

Social issues in Aboriginal communities are best addressed by local, respected community members where family, language and culture are at the forefront of effecting positive outcomes for children and their families and provides collaborative, strengths-based approach to addressing social issues.

The mentoring of people in early childhood/community services provided by an organisation proficient in these skills provides an opportunity to address current capacity shortages in the long term workforce, and can have flow on impacts within a community.

And the results (a case study): *After a mentoring session at (an Aboriginal community), a student informed Good Beginnings staff, "I told my niece she had to come to crèche with her little boy, and I have been teaching her about healthy daga." This student's niece had previously been referred to Good Beginnings for parenting skills training and child development support, by Child Protection Authorities. Unfortunately the family did not engage with Good Beginnings. The student had seen a need and decided to implement support herself. She obviously felt confident she possessed the skills and knowledge necessary to help this family member and did not require professional intervention.*

TOR 6: In making any recommendations for future Australian Government policy settings, the Commission will consider options within current funding parameters.

In a complex system, there is no one common set of outcomes that are being sought for children and young people. This presents a barrier to demonstrating the aggregated contribution of the Early Childhood Learning and community sector to societal impact for all children. This is partly because of the fragmentation of the system which hinders, rather than facilitates, the aggregation of individual results, and in turn, makes it impossible to understand and communicate the impact of the sector's work as a whole.

Good Beginnings advocates strongly for a common outcomes framework and comments the work of *The NEST*, led by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) as being a sound step in the right direction.

The Community Organisations Measuring Outcomes (COMO) Alliance has been working to achieve a solution to the challenge of establishing consistent measures working towards common outcomes. This involves the development of an overarching shared measurement framework that aligns program and organisational level outcomes with population level outcomes to demonstrate collective impact for all children. A common approach to outcomes measurement across the program will support the building of an evidence base of 'what works and why' across interventions. The efforts of many need to be captured through an overarching framework that depicts how the lives of children, youth and families in Australia are changing.

The COMO Alliance approach to outcomes measurement goes beyond improved practices within individual organisations and programs. COMO supports the use of an overarching outcomes framework by governments and philanthropy; reducing red tape by focusing more on outcomes in program and funding reporting; and contributing to building the evidence map to demonstrate how programs and interventions achieve outcomes.

Recommendation:

- *Develop a common outcomes framework for all children and youth, building on established work programs and alliances*



**A Good Beginning
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