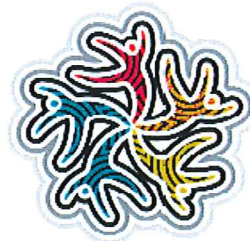


Commission for Children
and Young People

improving young lives



Productivity Commission

Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning

Meeting the needs of vulnerable children

The Commission for Children and Young People has been established to promote continuous improvement and innovation in policies and practices relating to the safety and wellbeing of children and young people generally, and in particular those who are vulnerable.

As described in the *Childcare and Early Childhood Learning - Issues Paper*, enhancing early childhood learning and development opportunities contributes to: healthy child development (which builds human capital); better transitioning of children into the formal education system; reducing the risk of harm to certain children in the community; and overcoming disadvantage and its longer term social consequences; in addition to facilitating greater participation in the workforce by parents. The Cummins Inquiry, led by former Supreme Court Judge the Hon. Philip Cummins, Emeritus Professor Dorothy Scott and Mr Bill Scales AO, culminated in *The Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry*, which was tabled in the Victorian Parliament on 28 February 2012. This was followed by *The Directions Paper*, and ultimately the vulnerable children's strategy, *Victoria's Vulnerable Children: Our Shared Responsibility 2013 – 2022*, which stated:

"This strategy is premised on the powerful role that universal services such as health services, antenatal care, maternal and child health, early childhood development services, including kindergarten, and primary and secondary school can play in supporting vulnerable children and families." (*Victoria's Vulnerable Children: Our Shared Responsibility*, p7).

Contemporary thinking on vulnerability reinforces the critical significance of the responsiveness of the universal sector – in providing a sense of community and belonging, in preventing vulnerability and supporting vulnerable families.

We know that quality early childhood programs are especially important for vulnerable children and their families – who obtain particular benefit from them. Whilst every family is different, we know that these families may live on the margins of society, demonstrating challenges posed by mental health issues, substance abuse, violence, homelessness, poverty and in many cases, will reflect intergenerational disadvantage.

Such families will often be socially isolated, making them less likely to be aware of available supports or how to access these services. Families may also be afraid of dealing with agencies when they perceive them to be representing authorities who play an enforcement role in their lives. Early childhood services have a vital role to play for vulnerable families where for some, engagement with an early childhood service may be the first formal contact in the broader community they have had.

To effectively engage families, services need to employ innovative and responsive methods to encourage the building of trust and rapport. In addition however, they need to have

knowledge of resources in their community – of the various early childhood and family support agencies and services that may be able to assist the families they work with.

Through our work with vulnerable children over many years we have seen the value of communities supporting parents and families; and the vital role that community development plays in connecting with families and helping them to network in their own neighbourhoods. We are all familiar with the old adage, “It takes a village to raise a child”. Early childhood services play a key role in the community in terms of networking and promoting community development and connectedness.

In 2011, the Victorian Auditor General report on *Early Childhood Development Services: Access and Quality* stated:

“Good quality early childhood programs not only promote a young child’s health, learning and skill development, but also positively influence their longer-term health, educational and social outcomes. This is particularly so for vulnerable and disadvantaged children.”
(VAGO, 2011, p7)

A strong, universal early childhood service sector is vital to the wellbeing of young families, and ultimately to the community. We also know that vulnerability, or the state of being vulnerable, is not necessarily a permanent descriptor. Some families will move in and out of vulnerability as their circumstances change, and the non-stigmatising nature of universal services provides scope for provision of supportive and preventative services for vulnerable children and their families.

Many long term studies have shown that high quality early childhood education and care can help to prevent or mitigate the impact of disadvantage upon young children.

As stated in the *Report of the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry*, Victoria has a strong infrastructure of universal services for infants, children and young people, including through maternal and child health, kindergarten and schools. (p 128)

While we know that there are generally high participation rates for maternal and child health and kindergarten, we also know that the most vulnerable children are often excluded from these services (Report of the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry, p128; and VAGO, 2011)

The *Report of the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children* found that:

“Further efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect need to include the:

- Targeting of future government investment in the early years to communities that have the highest concentration of vulnerable children and families;
- Provision of early support to vulnerable pregnant women and infants;
- Implementation of strategies to encourage greater participation by the families of vulnerable children in universal services;
- Examination of current funding and infrastructure arrangements for services such as kindergartens, maternal and child health services and community playgroups that operate in locations where there are high numbers of vulnerable children and families;
- Development of a consistent statewide approach to antenatal psychosocial assessment;
- Development of a universal parenting information and support program that can be delivered by maternal and child health services and schools in communities with high concentrations of vulnerable children and families, at key ages and stages across the 0-17 age bracket; and
- Development of a wide-ranging education and information campaign targeted to parents and caregivers for all school-aged children to prevent child sexual abuse” (p 128).

In terms of the issues in relation to vulnerable children on which the Productivity Commission is seeking information, we make the following comments:

How well the needs of disadvantaged, vulnerable or other additional needs children are being met by the ECEC sector as a whole, by individual types of care, and in particular regions

As discussed, the universal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector is absolutely vital to the wellbeing of vulnerable children and their families. Throughout this vast sector, however, service provision and quality is variable and inconsistent. Maintenance and strengthening of the National Quality Framework is therefore critical. We must keep in mind that all of the documented benefits of early childhood education and care assume high service quality. High quality provision and assurance is vital for all children, however it is particularly important for vulnerable children, who have the most to gain, and who are known to derive the greatest benefit from early childhood programs.

It is critical that all children, irrespective of where they live, or the means or wellbeing of their family have access to high quality early childhood programs, which are responsive to the demographics, dynamics and needs of the local community – including Koorie families, low income families, families with a disability, children of prisoners, children at risk of abuse or neglect, CALD families, refugees and other vulnerable or disadvantaged children. For many children who have experienced, or are at risk of, abuse and neglect, a regulated early childhood service provides a safe and nurturing environment which is crucial to their healthy development, and which in some cases may otherwise be lacking from their lives.

The planning and provision of services in localities known to have significant numbers of families experiencing vulnerability, cannot be left to chance, or to the interests and motivation of the private or corporate sector. Recent media coverage has focused on concerns that there is much greater incentive for private child care operators to set up in wealthy, inner city suburbs, rather than outlying growth areas such as the Western area of Melbourne. This has significant implications for the long term wellbeing of families of low socio-economic background, and those most likely to experience vulnerability. It is therefore essential that comprehensive planning and oversight of the adequacy of ECEC provision occur at community, but also a government level.

The extent to which additional needs are being met by mainstream ECEC services or specialised services

A combination of mainstream (universal) and specialised services is vital to addressing the needs of vulnerable children and their families.

In addition to a strong universal service system, a range of specialist services and programs assist in supporting vulnerable children and their families. The importance of intervening early in terms of attempting to optimise the experiences and opportunities of vulnerable children has resulted in increased focus upon comprehensive home visiting programs that commence during the antenatal period. These programs are based on the knowledge that in order to optimise the experiences and outcomes of children, it is important to focus on the early home environment. Such programs are vital in reinforcing parents' role as the primary educators of their children, in promoting the importance of a warm, loving environment for children, and in modelling effective ways of engaging with young children which foster interaction and learning. These are valuable initiatives, which must be provided **in addition to** a dynamic and responsive universal service sector.

Key factors that explain any failure to meet these needs

There are many factors that may contribute to failure of early childhood programs to meet the needs of vulnerable children, and these can be divided into three types of barriers: service level barriers, family level barriers, and interpersonal or relational barriers.

"Service level (or structural) barriers include:

- lack of publicity about services
- cost of services
- limited availability
- failure to provide services that meet parents' felt needs
- inability of services to respond promptly to requests for help
- rigid eligibility criteria
- inaccessible locations
- lack of public transport
- limited hours of operation
- inflexible appointment systems
- lack of affordable childcare
- poor coordination between services
- the absence of an outreach capacity

Family level barriers include limited income, lack of social support, lack of private transport, unstable housing or homelessness, low literacy levels, large family size, personal preferences and beliefs about the necessity and value of services, physical or mental health issues or disability, and day-to-day stress.

Vulnerable parents have to balance competing needs, and sometimes 'survival' needs take priority over attendance at a service.

Relational or interpersonal barriers

In the case of *service providers*, relational barriers include:

- insensitive or judgmental attitudes and behaviour
- lack of awareness of cultural sensitivities, poor listening and helping skills
- inability to put parents at ease
- failure to acknowledge and build on family strengths and to engage families as partners

In the case of *parents*, relational barriers include:

- lack of trust in services
- fear of child protection services
- misperceptions of what services offer
- lack of the social skills and confidence to negotiate with professionals
- being easily intimidated or put off by perceived attitudes of staff or other parents "

(Centre for Community Child Health, 2010, *Engaging Marginalised and Vulnerable Families, Policy Brief, No 18, p2*).

It is useful to consider barriers to participation for vulnerable children and their families in this way. Cost or affordability of early childhood services is a significant issue for disadvantaged families. For a growing number of families child care and early childhood education services are increasingly out of reach, and the lack of access to affordable early childhood services potentially further exacerbates the child's vulnerability in terms of the potential of the primary carer (usually mother) to undertake paid employment, and in terms of the child's opportunity to participate in a program which promotes his/her development and wellbeing.

The Commission for Children and Young People has been contacted by several foster parents and kinship carers who have been unable to continue sending the children in their care to early childhood programs because of their inability to pay the fees. It is tragic to think of a four year old who had been relinquished as a baby by his drug affected parents, and cared for by an aunt, being withdrawn from a child care and kindergarten program because of his aunt's inability to meet the fees. This is exactly the sort of child that our system should support and nurture, for whom we should have a large and generous safety net.

In a time of increasing child care and early childhood fees, and a growing number of families experiencing vulnerability, this is a significant issue. There is a mismatch between

the rhetoric of the language of *accessibility* and *affordability* with the reality of experience of a great many families who genuinely struggle to afford to send their children to early childhood programs. Given that we know the fundamental importance of the universal ECEC sector, we need to be vigilant to ensure that the mainstream early childhood service sector is truly universally accessible and affordable.

We need to remember that vulnerability is not always immediately obvious or visible, and that the consequence of allowing the cost of ECEC services to rise, is that many families who may already be facing a range of complex issues and stressors, may have these exacerbated by their inability to meet the rising costs of child care and kindergarten services. As a consequence, the children in these families face marginalisation, and subsequently, developmental impacts. When we talk about productivity we need to also keep these children in mind – not only those who are already vulnerable, but those whose families, for a whole range of reasons, are on the margins, and at risk of becoming vulnerable. Provision of quality early childhood services is one of the most effective population measures any society can make.

The results of the Australian Early Development Index have shown that children living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged Australian communities are more than three times as likely to be developmentally vulnerable on language and cognitive skills, and twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable on emotional maturity, social competence, and physical health and wellbeing, than those from the least disadvantaged communities. (Australian Early Development Index 2012 Summary Report).

Quality early childhood services provide nurturing and supportive environments in which young children thrive, but for families at risk, for disadvantaged families, Koorie families, families facing mental illness, substance abuse or other health issues, or CALD families - for these families early childhood services provide a vital safety net for the child and their family. It is wholly unproductive for Australian society not to actively seek to mitigate against the effects of disadvantage and to provide all Australian children with the best possible opportunity to reach their potential.

What childcare operators and governments can do to improve the delivery of childcare services to children with additional needs?

- Monitor fees and charges of ECEC services and the extent to which they restrict participation of families, with a view to making adjustments as required.
- In areas of identified vulnerability (using AEDI) monitor the affordability of early childhood services and the way in which this impacts upon family choices and decision making.
- Overhaul the Special Child Care Benefit system which is difficult to access, short term and inconsistently administered.
- Provide free or significantly subsidised access to early childhood services for families experiencing vulnerability.
- Encourage early childhood services to actively promote their services to vulnerable families.
- Provide professional development training focusing on engaging with vulnerable families for all early childhood staff.
- Encourage universities and tertiary providers who train staff who work in the early childhood sector to have content in their courses which focuses on the many factors that contribute to vulnerability, how it manifests itself and impacts on young children, and how to effectively engage with vulnerable families.
- Maintain the National Quality Framework and strengthen it with key indicators and measures which focus on engaging with, and addressing the needs of vulnerable families.

The types of ECEC services which work particularly well and would be viable in regional and remote locations

- Integrated, multipurpose early childhood services which provide a range of co-located services (eg. Maternal and Child Health, playgroups, child care, kindergarten, parent groups, counselling, toy library, school).
- Integrated services enable families to access several services from a single site, reduce travel time, facilitate referral from one service to another and promote engagement and 'connectedness' between services.
- Mobile playgroups and preschool services are also vital in remote regional areas and have proven to be very successful in engaging families in isolated and regional areas.

In conclusion, we thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the ***Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning***, and we reiterate the concern that effective delivery of ECEC services must of necessity focus on the needs of all Australian children, including the most vulnerable.