

Early Childhood Development Workforce Study
Productivity Commission
LB2 Collins Street East
MELBOURNE VIC 8003

Email: ecdworkforce@pc.gov.au

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT WORKFORCE STUDY SUBMISSION

BY

VISION AUSTRALIA

Submission to:	Productivity Commission
Response Submitted by:	Susan Thompson, Advocacy Officer, Vision Australia
Submission Date:	3 February 2011

1. INTRODUCTION

Vision Australia is pleased to provide comment for the Productivity Commission's study into the early childhood development (ECD) workforce on behalf of our client families of children who are blind or have low vision who, as a group, have unique needs for ECD support and services.

While Vision Australia would normally use the terminology children 'who are blind or have low vision' (to differentiate these two groups), we will in this submission predominantly use the term 'vision impairment' to encompass both these groups of clients.

1.1 ABOUT VISION AUSTRALIA

Vision Australia is Australia's largest provider of services to people who are blind, have low vision, or are deafblind. It has been formed over the past several years through the merger of several of Australia's oldest, most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies. Our vision is that people who are blind or have low vision will increasingly have the choice to participate fully in every facet of life in the community.

To help realise this goal, we are committed to providing high-quality services to the community of people who are blind or have low vision, and their families, in areas that include early childhood, orientation and mobility, employment, information, recreation and independent living. We also work collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers people who are blind or have low vision face in accessing the community or in exercising their rights as Australian citizens.

1.2 VISION IMPAIRMENT AND ECD SERVICES

One source well articulating the impact of vision impairment and thus the early childhood support needs is a document sponsored by the New York Department of Health, "Clinical Practice Guideline, Report of the Recommendations Vision Impairment, Assessment and Intervention for Young Children (Aged 0-3 Years)"

"What is the Impact of Vision Impairment on Development?"

Vision impairment during infancy and early childhood can adversely affect multiple aspects of a child's development. Vision is the perceptual system that is most suited to gaining information about the environment, particularly information about shape and space. Vision is also an important factor in early interactions between the infant and the parent(s). Because interaction with the environment plays such a major role in typical development, it is not surprising that children who have reduced sensory information because of vision impairment often find it more difficult to acquire various developmental skills and therefore demonstrate delays in development. Some children with vision impairment show not only delays but also different patterns of development when compared to typically developing children."

1.3 VISION AUSTRALIA'S ECD SERVICES

In order to address the unique needs of children with vision impairment, Vision Australia's services to children start at birth, and continue through to young adulthood.

We work directly with children who are blind or have low vision and their families. Our staff work with the child and their family to initially assess the child's abilities, then develop programs that are tailored to their unique learning needs and family goals.

This support is provided by a team usually consisting of orthoptists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech pathologists, early childhood educators, orientation & mobility instructors, adaptive technology consultants, counsellors and other professionals.

All services are provided using a family-centred approach, recognising the importance of working in partnership with the family. There are no fees charged to families for these services.

Services Offered:

- Information on eye conditions
- Early childhood services including ideas to extend learning through play, early braille experiences, transition and support to staff in early childhood programs and schools
- Therapy services for children (physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech pathology)
- Individual and group programs for children, adolescents, parents and carers (social skills, independence skills, participation in leisure and sports, career education and personal development)
- Transition to work and further education (bursary opportunities, employment services)
- Print / braille access (Braille/audio library, transcription services, Felix tactile book library for young children, adaptive technology)
- Emotional Support (support for the parent/child bond and relationship, counselling, peer support, facilitated supports for parents called Quality Living Groups)
- Equipment Solutions
- Orientation and Mobility Training to assist children to learn to move safely, confidently and independently around their home, school and in the community
- Advocacy support
- Outreach Services for children and their families in our country and isolated areas
- Low Vision Clinic
- Adaptive Technology Consultancy and Training service.

Vision Australia also provides consultancy, support and in-service training, to early childhood services to assist them in providing an inclusive environment to children who are blind or have low vision which addresses their unique development needs.

2. SCOPE OF THIS SUBMISSION

Vision Australia's comments primarily concentrate on the mix of early child care services, the quality of services and competency of professional staff in the sector, and the importance of the availability of training programs, and thus the availability of competently trained/experienced staff to meet the unique development needs of children who are blind or have low vision.

3. THE CONTINUUM AND INTEGRATION OF SERVICES

3.1. THE SPAN OF ECD SERVICES

The paper refers to the age range of early childhood as 0 to 8 years. However, for many children with vision impairment, as noted in the introductory information, development can be delayed longer than for sighted children. Therefore, in terms of the range of early childhood services, this span should be extended so that children who require more attention to their development, still fit into the umbrella of early childhood services, according to need.

3.2. THE FUNDING MAZE

In different states, and at different levels of government, parents of children with disabilities often face a constant 'round robin' of applying for different funding for different services at different stages of their child's development.

This means that on a regular basis, in order to secure funding for services, parents must repeatedly state and re-state 'how bad things are for their child' and being in a position of always having to focus on the negatives to secure funding.

Consideration should be given to an element in early childhood services for children with disabilities providing a 'one-stop-shop' to facilitate parents in co-ordinating services and obtaining required funding to meet the child's and family's needs as they progress through early childhood services. This should also include family support and after school care.

This is illustrated by an example cited in the issues paper of a centre established by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development where the full range of early childhood services are co-located.

4. TARGETED SERVICES TO DISADVANTAGED GROUPS WITH DISABILITIES

4.1 NEED FOR TARGETED SERVICES

The issues paper on page 5 raises the question of the possible need for more targeted services to such groups as children from Indigenous or culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, or children who are living in regional, rural or remote areas, who find it difficult to access mainstream services.

The difficulties of children in those disadvantaged groups is often compounded by disability. Further, given the relative low incidence but unique development needs of children with vision impairment we would agree that specially targeted services should be considered.

4.2 POSSIBLE SERVICE DELIVERY MODESS

Services which utilise technologies such as the internet and video conferencing are possible mechanisms to achieve targeted services to these groups.

To children in very remote areas, these services would likely be professional support to parents. They could conceivably include programs directed at children such as video conference of play programs working with parents over a video link to develop the child's skills.

This would also facilitate the bringing together of children and families with professionals skilled in addressing cultural and language needs.

5. NATIONAL PARITY

Vision Australia believes that the availability and quality of services should not be determined by the state of residence.

We also believe that parity between states in such areas as salaries, wages and conditions; staff to child ratios; and required qualifications, would contribute to equity between states for the workforce and thus to ECD services.

We are pleased to note the paper lists a number of national reform initiatives which will in part help to bring some consolidation and uniformity around quality and access to children's services, which is particularly important for families who already face the funding and service maze with regard to children with disabilities. We note:

- development of an Early Intervention and Prevention Framework under the National Disability Agreement; and
- the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and School Age Care.

6. PARENTS IN PARTNERSHIP

The issues paper makes reference to the informal elements of early child care, which is taken to mean early child care undertaken by family friends or parents.

In addition, we believe that parents are frequently also a vital element in the provision of services in the formal environment. In addition to being acknowledged as having valuable knowledge to impart about working with their child with vision impairment, they should be seen as part of the skill base for the childcare and development service in the approach to their child's services.

That is, parents should be recognized as partners in the process.

Further, it could be extremely beneficial for children with disabilities with unique development needs if training opportunities and funding were available to assist parents in improving their personal knowledge of early childhood development approaches at home. We will also discuss the training of early childcare workers later in this submission.

7 TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ECD WORKERS

7.1. PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OF ALL ASSOCIATED ECD PROFESSIONALS

Vision Australia is of the view that the professional skills of all stages and elements in the early childhood sector with respect to their skills in working with children with

special needs is important. This not only includes early childhood educators, but also family support workers and health professionals.

Vision Australia has in the past provided specialist seminars to undergraduate programs to provide information on vision impairment, as well as professional development presentations, and continues to have the commitment to providing this input to professional development within the sector.

7.2 TRAINING PROGRAMS IN VISION IMPAIRMENT AND DISABILITY FOR ECD WORKERS

The shortage of formalized training in vision impairment is extremely concerning. There is just one formal qualification at the postgraduate level only, which specifically addresses vision impairment. This is run in New South Wales by the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children's Renwick College through the University of Newcastle.

Further, this program addresses education, but not early childhood health, family support or early intervention and development.

Thus, quality expertise of early childhood staff in working with children with vision impairment is reliant on any experience gained on the job, input from professionals such as Vision Australia's children's services staff, and in partnership with parents.

7.3. UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

Given that children with vision impairment are equally in need and equally entitled to access the same early childhood services as their sighted peers, Vision Australia believes it is extremely important that in all undergraduate training programs, there are units specifically covering disability (including vision impaired children).

The content should include, as a minimum:

- The impact of different disabilities on child development;
- The need for the earliest possible referral to specialist services;
- Identification of specialist resources
- Planning inclusive services and programs;
- The identification of the need for professional development; and
- The legal obligation for services not to exclude children with disabilities.

As stated above, Vision Australia has the capacity to provide a depth of information on vision impairment, to undergraduate programs.

This will contribute to a well trained and resourced workforce, equipped to address the special needs of all children.

7.4. SPECIFIC PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN VISION IMPAIRMENT

In addition to having a body of professional knowledge and experience in working with children with vision impairment, Vision Australia is a registered training organisation.

In order to meet the professional skills needs of our ECD therapists, it has developed core competency training modules which our children's services staff are required to complete. We therefore have available training resources in working with children with vision impairment which could contribute to the professional development of the broader ECD workforce.

We would recommend that the ECD sector should have a register containing information on where and how the workforce can gain professional training in specific disability areas such as vision impairment.

7.5 TRAINING AND LICENSING REQUIREMENTS

Strong consideration should be given to the licensing regime with regard to early childhood centres and the need for workers who have qualifications which include dealing with children with special needs.

A minimum requirement in levels of in-service training should also be a factor in the licensing, to ensure services are updating their staff knowledge base into the future. This licensing consideration should include family daycare services.

This should help ensure that parents of children with disabilities can expect a minimum level of service to meet their child's special needs, and will in turn drive the demand for undergraduate and postgraduate programs to train people in working with the unique needs of children with specific disabilities.

This licensing requirement would need to have some uniformity around the country, and be reflected in publically and readily accessible information for parents, (including on websites compliant with World Wide Web, Accessibility Initiative guidelines).

7.6. TRAINING AND REMUNERATION

The experience of some of Vision Australia's children's services staff is that any additional training (such as extra knowledge in work with children with vision impairment) needed or desired by ECD workers in centres is often not funded, not allowed during the working hours, and further, not recognised in remuneration or mobility of career paths.

8. OTHER RELEVANT ELEMENTS IMPACTING THE ECD WORKFORCE

8.1. PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF ECD OCCUPATIONS

The paper on page 19 raises the issue of "A perception that many ECD occupations have a low professional status".

Vision Australia is of the view that there is a very low level of community understanding of the importance of brain development in young children, including those with vision impairment who often require intervention or support from professional therapists.

This poor recognition must impact the level of pay; the motivation of the workforce to continue developing professional skills, and thus the levels of service to children and families.

8.2. ATTRACTION AND RETENTION OF ECD WORKERS TO WORK WITH CHILDREN WITH VISION IMPAIRMENT

It has been observed by ECD staff, within Vision Australia, that it can be difficult to retain staff to work as ECD professionals in vision impairment. This is because of a perception that working with this group of children is far more specialised than it is in practice. Whereas with the relevant experience on the job, and the relevant professional skills, working with vision impaired children need not be overwhelming.

9. OTHER RELEVANT INQUIRIES IN THE SECTOR

Vision Australia notes that at the time of writing this submission, there is focus on other elements of early childhood services occurring at both state and federal levels.

For example, in Victoria, The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) are conducting a major reform of education services, and this includes early intervention services. Further, at the federal level the Department of Family and Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) are consulting regarding the Early Intervention for Children with Disability 'Better Start' initiative.

As such, we believe it important that these and other such initiatives which interrelate directly or indirectly to early childhood services for children with disabilities are specifically examined in this study.

Clearly, these processes will have an impact on the workforce side of the equation in their influence on the capacity of families to access early childhood services. Further this will then affect the demand for professional training and development programs available to ensure that the workforce is equipped to meet the special needs of children who are blind or have low vision.

10. ACCESSIBILITY OF COMMISSION PROCESSES

Vision Australia was pleased to note, that the submission coversheet for this consultation process included requirements for submitters to provide the Commission with electronic formats that are accessible to screen readers. However this positive step forward was somewhat negated by the Commission's failure to itself provide an accessible format of the issues paper on its website.

11. CONCLUSION

Vision Australia hopes our submission will assist the Productivity Commission in its study of the early childhood development workforce in all its forms (both formal and informal) and how it can best meet the needs of families of children who are blind, have low vision and ultimately the children themselves in being facilitated to develop normally, alongside their non-disabled peers.

We would be happy to discuss further, any of the issues raised in this submission.