

Inquiry into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave
Recommendations from Early Childhood Australia

The Productivity Commission's issues paper *Inquiry into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave* published April 2008 makes it clear that Australia and the United States are the only two OECD nations not providing some form of statutory government supported paid maternity, paternity or parental leave (p27).

ECA notes that the terms of reference of the Inquiry require the Commission to, among other things, "investigate and report on the economic, productivity and social costs and benefits of providing paid maternity, paternity and parental leave" p31 (1) and to assess models for the provision of paid maternity, paternity and parental leave in regard "to their impact on the development of young children, including the particular developmental needs of newborns in their first two years". p2 (2) ECA is aware that the Commission is also to have regard to the employment of women, their workforce participation and earnings and the workforce participation of both parents more generally. We have developed our input with these terms in mind.

ECA's comments are made in the context of a need for Australia to take a range of steps to support families and young children in the face of great social change, which of is also the context of the Inquiry. It is a given that the past decades have seen enormous changes in the education and employment of women in Australia, and that a major driver of this has been the goal of supporting expansion of the economy. Simultaneously, there have been changes in our understanding of children's rights, growing evidence about the significance of early experiences for healthy human development and recognition of the extent to which strong families contribute to the capacity of the community.

In Australia, we have been slow both to make proper provision for the important unpaid work previously done by women in the family and to provide widely available good quality early education opportunities for very young children. We experience ongoing nation wide problems in the provision of good quality early education and child care, inadequate parental leave arrangements and the challenge of achieving flexible work practices. 'What about the kids' *Improving the experiences of infants and young children in a changing world at* www.niftey.cyh.com/Documents/PDF/Summary_FINAL-Web_Artwork.pdf retrieved June 2008

Notwithstanding that the current inquiry has defined terms of reference; ECA recommends that Parental Leave must be one strong component of a complete suite of provisions. We strongly recommend that the Inquiry is conducted with this in mind, as the contribution of one context component often impacts on the contribution of another component.

While we recognize the complexity of the context, Early Childhood Australia suggests that an investment in paid parental leave will generate great potential for ensuring children's short and long term wellbeing as well as the short and long term productivity gains for the nation. It should be noted, however, that we understand that paid maternity, paternity and parental leave cannot guarantee stable, nurturing, high quality early relationships. Nevertheless, by creating time and space for them to evolve it would make them much more likely, and would provide time and space for new parents to access relevant community supports.

Our comments to the *Inquiry into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave* focus on the interests of young children and their entitlement to infancy and childhood experiences which best support their healthy development. We will also stress the potential significant long term gains from this both for individuals and for the Australian society and its capacity and productivity, and we will present our broad view of the responsibility of the community for supporting these provisions. In all of this we are informed by evidence about the significant short and long term impact of early relationships and interactions on early growth and development (including on brain development, on the formation of secure attachments and on general health outcomes), by analyses of the economic impact of investment in the early years, and by our acknowledgement

of the underlying rights of children as citizens.

Early Childhood Australia believes there is irrefutable evidence that healthy development, of newborns, infants and the young child, including of the brain's architecture, depends on the quality and reliability of a young child's relationships. As already indicated we believe that paid parental leave will do much to set the environment for the establishment of these relationships between babies and parents.

The impact of early relationships

The significance of relationships in children's early development has been outlined by many researchers and analysts. The National Scientific Council for Children in its paper *Children develop in an environment of relationships* gives an effective summary.

"Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development – intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and moral. The quality and stability of a child's human relationships in the early years lay the foundation for a wide range of later developmental outcomes that really matter – self-confidence and sound mental health, motivation to learn, achievement in school and later in life, the ability to control aggressive impulses and resolve conflicts in nonviolent ways, knowing the difference between right and wrong, having the capacity to develop and sustain casual friendships and intimate relationships, and ultimately to be a successful parent oneself..... Relationships engage children in the human community in ways that help them define who they are, what they can become, and how and why they are important to other people"

Young children develop in an environment of relationships. Working Paper National Scientific Council on the Developing Child – Page 1, Summer 2004 reprinted December 2006

http://www.developingchild.net/pubs/wp/Young_Children_Environment_Relationships.pdf

Retrieved 19 June 2008

ECA also argues that secure early attachment is essential and that it is nurtured by the warmth and trust of early caregiver/parent-child relationships. Secure attachment provides 'a foundation for positive relationships with peers and teachers, healthy self-concept, and emotional and moral understanding.' Ross A Thompson Development in the first years of life Caring for infants and toddlers at http://www.futureofchildren.org/information2827/information_show.htm?doc_id=79338 retrieved June 2008

The significance of attachment to healthy relationships and functioning has recently been explored by Australian projects funded under the Australian Government's *Stronger Families and Communities* program, for example The Benevolent Society's *Partnerships in Early Childhood* and the Adelaide Gowrie Child Centre's *Through the Looking Glass*.

The importance of breastfeeding to a child's healthy development is uncontested in the literature. Significantly, the World health Organisation now recommends that women exclusively breastfeed their babies for six months. (HREOC 2002)

With regard to parental leave, *A time to Act: Paid Maternity Leave for all South Australian Women*¹, provides evidence that there is a causal relationship between early return to work and cessation of breast feeding. There is also evidence that paid maternity leave is associated with the initiation of breast feeding as well as with longer periods of breast feeding. The same article about international policies about parental leave and child care cites evidence that parental leave that extends beyond the first six months of life is also associated with higher rates of employment for women of child-bearing age.

http://www.futureofchildren.org/information2827/information_show.htm?doc_id=79381

Similar evidence is provided by Gregg et al 2005 quoted in "A time to act:...." p 21 indicates that

children whose mothers stay out of the workforce for more than 12 weeks are more likely to be breast fed, are breast fed longer The policy implications of this are that extending job protected maternity leave will lead to improvements in child health.”

Economic Impact of Investment in the Early Years

ECA submits that there is no trade off between investing in these relationships for newborns, infants and young children and the economic productivity gains required by the nation now and in the future. The importance of education in securing these outcomes is recognized in the government's platform, and the first year of a child's life is the clearly beginning of their early education.

We make the point that although most of the economic analysis of the benefits of investment in early education have focused on three (3) to five (5) year olds, the research on early brain development makes it quite clear that the very early experience of young children provides the foundation on which the gains of a high quality early education are made. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child argues “the timing and quality of early experience combine to shape brain architecture”

http://www.developingchild.net/pubs/wp/Timing_Quality_Early_Experiences.pdf retrieved June 2008

What this means is that there is no equity-efficiency trade off in an investment in the very early experiences of young children. <http://web.mit.edu/workplacecenter/docs/Full%20Report.pdf> In fact ECA would argue that the gains from an early childhood experience in which the relationships described by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (quoted above) are fostered underwrite the claims made by Heckmann 2006 for investment in early childhood education:

It (quality early childhood education) –is a rare public policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice and, at the same time, promotes productivity in the economy...

http://economistsview.typepad.com/economistsview/2006/01/heckman_investi.htm

From this perspective alone ECA would argue that government investment in paid maternity, paternity and parental leave is essential.

Comments re child care services for infants, babies and toddlers

A related significant concern is that the likelihood of consistent and reliable relationships being available in current childcare environments is not high. For example, ratios of one adult to five babies in group sizes of up to 15 for babies under 12 months, the current generally high staff turnover in childcare services and the inability of these services to attract highly qualified staff mitigate against the development the trusting and secure relationships so essential for all young children but particularly for children under twelve months.

It is the case, however, that quality outcomes are possible in child care services where the staff is stable, their qualities and qualifications appropriate and where child: staff ratios and group size reflect the evidence of what is required if child care is to enable the stable, trusting relationships that underpin children's early development. Such care is expensive to families (unless it is cross subsidised in some way) and is not widely available. To sum up – strong relationships and secure attachments are possible in very high quality services but for the general population are much more likely in the context of paid parental leave.

Community responsibility

ECA subscribes to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child* and sees children as citizens in their own right. We also believe that the long term goals for the productivity of the

nation set out by the Prime Minister are underwritten by the quality of the early experiences of young children. On both these grounds we believe that responsibility for ensuring that quality of children's early experiences is a whole of community responsibility.

With regard to Parental Leave, we believe that paid parental leave would contribute substantially to the desired outcomes. ECA recognises that the issues of who should have access to leave (mother, father and/or both, natural parents and adoptive parents), length of leave, and how the leave should be funded are complex and on some of these matters we have no final opinion at this time.

However, ECA is of the strong view that the period of paid parental leave should be no less than twelve months. We believe that the evidence in terms of child wellbeing, maternal health and a commitment to the principle of shared parental responsibility for children support this position. From this ECA suggests that there should be a minimum of 12 months paid parental leave and that for the first six (6) months priority should be given to paid maternity leave. We also believe that there is considerable merit in making provision for a period immediately after the child's birth for a paternity leave. The decision about who takes leave in the second six months should be the families' decision. Adoptive parents should have the same rights.

ECA further suggests that the responsibility for funding this leave should be a whole of community responsibility and should not be the responsibility of employers alone.

The question of whether parental leave payments should be at the same amount for everyone is complex and we do not have a final view at this time. We do submit, however, that it is vital that paid leave provisions are sufficient to act as a strong incentive for people to access the leave, rather than a disincentive.

Note:

ECA also wishes to draw attention to the work of the Centre for Work + Life in South Australia in particular the Discussion Paper *A time to act: Paid maternity leave for all South Australian Women* by Barbara Pocock. This submission brings together a range of research underwriting the benefits of paid maternity leave in terms of infant health and well being generally. The paper also indicates clear benefits of a period of paid maternity leave for the health of the mother. Unpaid leave, it appears, does not have the same benefits.

References

Australian Government Productivity Commission (2008). *Inquiry into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave – Issues Paper, April 2008*. Retrieved 19 June 2008, www.pc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0011/78491/parentalsupport.pdf

Centre for Work + Life University of South Australia (2007) *A Time to Act: Paid Maternity Leave for All South Australian Women – Discussion Paper NO.4/07* Barbara Pocock

Early Childhood Education for All: A Wise Investment, April 2005 Recommendations arising from “The Economic Impacts of Child Care and Early Education: Financing Solutions for the Future” A conference sponsored by Legal Momentum’s Family Initiative and the MIT Workplace Center Retrieved 19 June 2008 <http://web.mit.edu/workplacecenter/docs/Full%20Report.pdf>

HEREOC (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission) 2002, *A Time to Value: Proposal for a National Paid Maternity Leave Scheme*.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). *Working Paper 1: Young Children Develop In An Environment Of Relationships*. Retrieved 19 June 2008 <http://www.developingchild.net>.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007). *Working Paper 5 “The Timing and Quality of Early Experiences Combine to Shape Brain architecture”* Retrieved 12 June 2008 <http://www.developingchild.net>

Thoma, M. (2006, 10 Jan). Heckman: Investing in Disadvantaged Children is Fair and Efficient. *Economist’s View*. Retrieved 19 June 2008, http://economistsview.typepad.com/economistsview/2006/01/heckman_investi.html

Thompson, R. A. (2001). Development in the first years of life. *Caring for Infants and Toddlers*, 11(1). Retrieved 19 June 2008, www.futureofchildren.org/information2826/information_show.htm?doc_id=79334

Waldfogel, J (2001) International Policies Toward Parental Leave and Child Care *Caring for Infants and Toddlers* 11(1) Retrieved 26 June 2008 http://www.futureofchildren.org/information2827/information_show.htm?doc_id=79381

‘What about the kids’ *Improving the experiences of infants and young children in a changing world* Retrieved June 19 2008 2008 www.niftey.cyh.com/Documents/PDF/Summary_FINAL-Web_Artwork.pdf