

## *Submission: Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse families*

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the *Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse families*. We have drawn on our consultation with members and our knowledge of the evidence base to highlight key themes and recommendations to inform the Inquiry.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. We represent over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out-of-home care.

Many of our member organisations work with children and families who present with multiple, co-occurring needs, including newly arrived migrant and refugee families. These families often experience social isolation, housing and income insecurity and fear of loss of cultural identity for their children.

### **Our consultation process**

The Centre undertook a limited review of the literature on engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families with services and consulted with a range of organisations to inform this submission including:

- Child and family service providers, local government and health services in multiple metropolitan and rural settings with proportionally high CALD populations
- Early Parenting Centres
- Ethnic Community Council of Victoria
- VICSEG New Futures
- Playgroup Victoria
- Bicultural support workers from several agencies
- Scanlon Foundation Community Hub governance group
- Communities for Children sites in the north and west of Melbourne.

### **Key areas of focus**

#### **1. Population growth**

Victoria has a diverse and growing population of families. According to the 2016 ABS Census, of the 5.93 million people living in Victoria at that time:

- 28 per cent were born overseas in over 200 countries
- 49 per cent were born overseas or born in Australia with at least one parent born overseas
- 26 per cent spoke a language other than English at home.<sup>1</sup>

Between 2011 and 2016, the proportion of overseas-born in Victoria was 22 per cent.<sup>2 3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) 'Census of Population and Housing', Canberra: Government of Australia.

The proportion of Victorians speaking a foreign language at home increased by 25 per cent from 2011 to 2016, with particular growth in populations from India, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, Thailand, South Korea and Myanmar.<sup>4</sup>

The Local Government Areas with the highest numbers of overseas born Victorians were Casey, Brimbank, Wyndham, Monash, Greater Dandenong, Melbourne, Hume, Whittlesea, Whitehorse and Moreland.<sup>5</sup> In many of these growth suburbs, there are other factors intersecting with cultural and language difference including high rates of economic hardship. Studies show that early intervention to support these families can not only reduce social isolation but 'is the best investment in moving people out of poverty into self-sufficiency'.<sup>6</sup>

In specific growth suburbs such as the City of Hume, there are multiplying risk factors for children, with high rates of Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) disadvantage, with some suburbs with over 60 per cent of children aged 0-14 years speaking a language other than English in the home. When combined with data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) in the City of Hume on developmental vulnerability, there are concerning implications for children's social-emotional health and wellbeing and school readiness.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Barriers to engagement

Studies highlight the multiple and interacting barriers to early years and family services participation faced by CALD families, including structural, service-related, language and cultural, and personal barriers.<sup>8</sup> Cost, local availability, inadequate staffing levels and limited access to specialist supports are potential structural barriers. Hours of operation, rigid appointments, insensitive or judgmental staff attitudes and behaviours, lack of professional development and poor attention to multiculturalism are amongst the service level barriers that can impact on access and participation.<sup>9</sup>

## 3. Importance of system-wide and multidisciplinary approaches

Diversity is now a mainstream issue in Victoria across government departments, particularly in the population growth corridors of Melbourne where children are growing up in neighbourhoods with a wide range of cultural groups from Southeast and central Asia, Africa and the Middle East, all settling at the same time, compared to the previous generation of largely European migration. The language

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2011), 'Census of Population and Housing', Canberra: Government of Australia.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Premier and Cabinet, (2018), 'Population diversity in Victoria: 2016 census: Local Government Areas', Melbourne, Victoria: State of Victoria.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Moore, T. and McDonald, M. (2013), *Acting Early, Changing Lives: How prevention and early action saves money and improves wellbeing*. Prepared for The Benevolent Society. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health at The Murdoch Children's Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital.

<sup>7</sup> Hume City Council, (2016), *State of Hume's Children Report*, Broadmeadows, Victoria: Hume City Council.

<sup>8</sup> Sawrikar, P. and Katz, I. (2008) 'Enhancing family and relationship service accessibility and delivery to culturally and linguistically diverse families in Australia', Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/enhancing-family-and-relationship-service-accessibility-and/barriers-service> (accessed 10 October 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Carbone, S., Fraser, A., Ramburuth, R. and Nelms, L. (2004). *Breaking Cycles, Building Futures. Promoting inclusion of vulnerable families in antenatal and universal early childhood services*, Melbourne, Victoria: Victorian Department of Human Services; and Arney F, and Scott, D. eds. (2013), *Working with vulnerable families: A partnership approach*, Port Melbourne, Victoria: Cambridge University Press.

of 'ethnic minority groups' is no longer relevant with a government policy focus on the benefits of multiculturalism for Victoria's future. Our consultations confirmed the importance of a systems approach to planning for multiculturalism in the early years.

Stakeholders also highlighted the critical importance of 'soft entry' points when engaging CALD families, such as in supported playgroups, Community Hubs and library storytelling, so that relationships can be built around cultural safety and families can gain access to a range of child and adult programs at the one time. For example, Adult English and Supported Playgroups offered in the library setting after a Library storytelling activity.

### Importance of holistic approaches

Studies and our consultations highlight the importance of holistic approaches in working with CALD families with the parent and child together. Supported playgroups and community hubs have been successful strategies for engaging migrant families because they offer an informal or 'soft entry' place for families. Children can participate and be welcomed into the community regardless of English language competency.<sup>10</sup>

Integrated adult and child learning programs in English, where families can learn English with their child, not necessarily separated in childcare centres, could encourage families to support language learning in the home and benefit two generations rather than one.

### Early intervention

Feedback from our consultations highlights the need for the Victorian government to expand on its concept of 'early help' as it is important for CALD families to feel connected to community, to support their children's early development and maintain their children's cultural identity. In Victoria, Integrated Family Services, funded by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) through area-based alliances, offer support for large numbers of CALD families to access universal services such as Maternal and Child Health and 3- and 4- year old kindergarten. Members report that employment of bicultural family services workers, extensive use of interpreters and DHHS brokerage funding for essential items such as nappies, food and white goods, all contribute significantly to the ongoing participation of migrant families in early year's programs.

### Service provision flexibility

Expanding the flexibility of Integrated Family Services working at Community Hub sites offers many benefits. In Victoria, place-based Community Hubs offer access to multiple programs and 'trust building', culturally safe, holistic support for migrant families, with the child and family together. This is especially important for children and families that have experienced trauma and major adversity.<sup>11</sup> Local government libraries have been particularly successful in providing spaces for migrant families to meet informally and build community connections.

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<sup>10</sup> Commerford, J. and Robinson, E. (2016), 'Supported Playgroups for parents and children: The evidence for their benefits', Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Institute of Family Studies.  
<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/supported-playgroups-parents-and-children> (accessed 10 October 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Shonkoff, J., et al., (2012) The Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress, *American Academy of Pediatrics*, 129(1): e232-e246.

## Improving engagement in early years services through Community Hubs

There is evidence that place-based Community Hubs can help bridge the gap between migrant women and the broader community, giving them the best chance of achieving positive settlement outcomes, as they provide the vital missing links in the service delivery pathway. They also provide important steps to training and employment for women, building leadership and community volunteering opportunities that affirm community cohesion.<sup>12</sup>

Studies show that Community Hubs can help CALD families engage with early years services by:

- Providing access to a strong and inclusive community in their child's first eight years
- Connecting migrant families and their children to their first language and culture, while providing opportunities for greater exposure to English for the child and family
- Providing opportunities to bond within their cultural groups and gain exposure to bridging relationships across multicultural groups that together contribute to social inclusion.
- Providing multiple learning, education, wellbeing and health benefits for the child, family and community that require integrated planning and outcome frameworks
- Reducing child and family distress, social isolation and ultimately family violence prevention.<sup>13</sup>

## Critical importance of bilingual and bicultural workers

### Bilingual workers

The Victorian Government *Multicultural Policy Statement* affirms the importance of bilingual workers 'to support the participation of children from culturally diverse backgrounds in supported playgroups and kindergartens'.<sup>14</sup>

The Government expansion of funding for three-year old kindergartens offers an excellent opportunity to intervene early for children in families who are newly arrived and have language backgrounds other than English. Research highlights the value of bilingualism as an asset for educational advancement and the use of bilingual educators.<sup>15</sup> It is also important that understanding the impact of early trauma on children's learning is also warranted for some recently arrived migrant and refugee families.

Culturally responsive models of group pregnancy care with bilingual workers offer continuity of care and cultural safety for women and transition after birth to facilitated playgroups and community hub activities with a team of bicultural workers involved at each level. This continuity of care enables trust and navigation support to be enhanced with an early intervention, prevention approach. This has proven to be more cost and time effective than individualised consultations.

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<sup>12</sup> Scanlon Foundation (2015) *National Community Hubs Program: Delivery and Outcomes Report December 2015*, Melbourne, Victoria: Community Hubs Australia.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid; Arefadib, N, Fry, R, Moore, T, Rushton, S, and West, S, (2017), *Exploring the impact of community hubs on school readiness: full report*, Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health; Hopkins, L., Barnett, T., Zendarski, N. and Zazryn, T. (2014), *Evaluation of Supporting Parents Developing Children Project: Final Report*, Melbourne: The Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute; and VICSEG New Futures, (2014) *Evidence into Action: Family Mentoring for Newly Arrived Migrant Families*, Parkville, Victoria: Murdoch Children's Research Institute and Royal Children's Hospital.

<sup>14</sup> Victorian Government, (2017), *Victoria's Multicultural Policy Statement*, Melbourne: State of Victoria, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Clarke, P. (2000), *Supporting Identity, Diversity & Language in the Early Years*, Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

## Bicultural workers

Stakeholders suggest that engagement of CALD families in early years services could be improved by expanding the pool of bicultural workers available to partner with child and family services. A team of para-professional bicultural support officers and/or family mentors working within and across language groups can support community engagement for migrant families with a lived experience of the settlement journey and a commitment to further long-term social cohesion and citizenship. They work within ethno-specific groups and across multicultural groups, depending on the level of need and English competence of families in the area. Bicultural workers can be sourced from a central pool and can be offered on a short or long-term basis. Culturally safe supervision of bicultural workers is essential to their effectiveness and retention.

Targeted funding could assist agencies to enhance recruitment of qualified bicultural workers within child and family services and cultural competency training could assist with appropriate supervision to ensure cultural safety and worker retention. Child FIRST alliances in the north and west of Melbourne have recruited and employed between 25-30 per cent of their Integrated Family Services staff as bilingual family support workers, spread across 10-15 language groups. These workers, who have played a vital role in this service being considered to be culturally relevant and connected to community.

Employing bicultural workers in areas of high migrant population growth and encouraging more systematic use of interpreters and bicultural family mentors could support transitioning of families into kindergarten and then into school.

Bicultural Family Mentoring Programs have found to be particularly effective in engaging children and families in early years services. A 2011 evaluation found that involvement in early childhood programs with bicultural workers benefited CALD children and families in these ways:

- Children demonstrated improved social skills and skills necessary to transition to kindergarten.
- Parents demonstrated increased confidence in accessing child and family services for themselves and their children.
- There was an increase in the number of families accessing services in the locations where the program was in place.
- There was increased social inclusion and community participation of families in their local neighbourhoods and increased knowledge amongst families about child development.
- Early childhood education and care professionals were better able to engage with families and provide more culturally responsive services.
- Services worked more collaboratively in the interests of families and relationships between services and families improved.
- Communities were better able to promote the value of services for families and children.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> VICSEG 2014 Evidence into Action: Family mentoring for newly arrived migrant families, <file:///C:/Users/mlons/Desktop/Evidence+into+Action-Family+Mentoring+for+Newly+Arrived+Migrant+Families.pdf> (accessed 10 October 2019).

### **Including the voices of CALD families**

Our consultations highlight the importance of using co-design methodology, where participants are invited to have input into the design and effectiveness of social inclusion programs through community advisory structures and feedback processes. Ethnic organisations are able to bring the voices and expertise of CALD families into program development and evaluation. They are also able to coordinate pathways to volunteering, training and employment for migrant women with young children and to support CALD input into maternal and child health, kindergarten, family support and community health services. Our consultations suggest that strengthening partnership opportunities between ethnic organisations, child and family services and local government could help build greater understanding of cultural differences and child rearing norms across many local cultural groups.

### **Increase cultural safety and practitioner competence**

To address the barrier to engaging CALD families in services that are culturally inappropriate, the Centre recommends expanding and systematising training in cultural competence and cultural safety across Victorian child and family services. Consultations suggested this would enable practitioners to understand the appropriate questions to ask families about their culture and child rearing practices and build trust and cultural safety as a critical component of engagement. Over time, organisations can make sure they have culturally responsive models of support in place and as a result newly arrived cultural groups can gain confidence in seeking assistance from mainstream services when needed.

### **Target services for specific cohorts**

Review of the literature and our consultations suggest that funding for specific cohorts of migrants is needed, as groups of families and/or women can be invisible in child and family systems and are likely to need longer-term support. For example, women on Spousal or Student Visas, Humanitarian and Asylum seekers and Pacific Islander families who are not seen as migrants may have significant needs for early intervention. Other groups are over-represented in the child protection and youth justice systems. A common factor for some of these cohorts is that they present with larger families, many with children under five and teenage children, and the children might not attend school or kindergarten regularly.

### **Improve cross-government coordination and collaboration**

Stakeholders have expressed concern that five years of federal government settlement funding does not allow sufficient time to show the benefits for children and families experiencing significant vulnerability and hardship. The Centre recommends ongoing funding (not project based) that is offered beyond the first five years of federal funded settlement programs, until children enter school. Specifically, settlement funding that is attached to each child in the early years.

### **Building the evidence base**

While there is research to show the main barriers to engaging CALD families in child and family services, the evidence base for what works is still evolving. Victoria needs to encourage organisations to evaluate the impact of their programs, and share findings across the child and family services sector and with government policy makers. The Centre's Outcomes Practice and Evidence Network provides a useful vehicle for knowledge translation and dissemination and embedding in practice.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See the Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network (OPEN) portal at <https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/open/>

## Conclusion

To respond appropriately to the rapid and diverse growth in Victoria's CALD families, early childhood engagement services need to be able to recruit and retain qualified and culturally competent workers with the skills to engage families early in their children's development. They need to be able to work with families holistically, with the parent and child together and in close partnership with other agencies and sectors. Services need to be flexible in terms of availability and to be culturally safe for families, with better utilisation of 'soft entry' points with supported playgroups and community hub models. Service providers need to develop ways of incorporating the views of CALD families into the design, implementation and evaluation of programs. The Victorian government needs to continue to invest in programs and practices that are known to work, be prepared to trial promising programs, and incorporate research findings into program design and policy decision making. Going forward, we need a better understanding of how involvement in these services and programs can help children and families feel connected to their communities and gain maximum benefit from the government funded programs.

## Recommendations

The Centre makes the following recommendations to support CALD families to better engage with early years and family services and to improve the cultural responsiveness of the systems.

1. Establish a cross-sectoral, whole-of-government planning process for growth suburbs in Victoria to make sure culturally appropriate and coordinated services are ready for newly arrived migrant families and that these services are community-led and designed.
2. Establish linked datasets that provide accurate and ongoing monitoring of migration patterns to inform state and local government planning.
3. Expand partnership opportunities with ethnic organisations, child and family services and local government, which include opportunities for incorporating the views of CALD families in design, implementation and evaluation.
4. Establish a pool of para-professional bicultural support workers who are able to work with specific CALD groups and multicultural groups to support early engagement and navigation of child and family services.
5. Fund the provision of speech and language assessments in first language to support early intervention with children's language and cognitive development and school readiness.
6. Provide targeted and community led programs for specific cohorts such as Pacifika and South Sudanese families to make sure families and the communities can provide input into service improvements and that programs are of at least six years duration from pregnancy to primary school age.
7. Develop a workforce capability strategy for building cultural competency and cultural safety in all child and family services.
8. Develop a series of discussion papers to inform the next stage of the Inquiry. These could include topics relating to the development of culturally responsive early years models in partnership with families (for example, 3-year old kindergarten; ante-natal and MCH services; Early Parenting Centres, transition to school, Parent-child English language program models).