



Centre for Excellence
in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

Submission to the Department of Education and Training

Early Childhood Consultation Paper

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and
Children's Protection Society

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Victorian Government: The Education State – Early Childhood Response to consultation paper October 2015

Preamble

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare ('the Centre') and the Children's Protection Society (CPS) co-hosted a forum with a broad range of child and family services sector agencies to consider and discuss the themes, issues and questions raised in the Education State Early Childhood consultation paper.

Participants brought to the forum a wealth of experience, knowledge and expertise in early childhood education and care (ECEC), and identified key strengths and weaknesses of the current ECEC system. This submission outlines key areas for reform in the ECEC space, and identifies priorities to address those reform areas.

The Centre and CPS welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Victorian Government's Education State Early Childhood policy on behalf of the Centre's 100 members, and look forward to continuing to work in partnership with the Department of Education and Training (DET) on an ECEC reform agenda and its implementation.

1. About us

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

The Centre is a not-for-profit peak body representing nearly 100 community service organisations across the state. Our member organisations provide a range of services to the community, including parenting and early education and care (ECEC) services with a particular focus on children and families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.

A key goal of the Centre is to build the sector's capacity to deliver services and to influence government policy and programs in line with better practice. We do this by initiating, supporting and promoting research, cross-sectoral consultation and engagement, sector development, advocacy through campaigns and media liaison, and providing ongoing programs that focus on key areas of the child and family services sector.

The Children's Protection Society

CPS is an independent and voluntary child and family services organisation with no political or religious affiliations. It is one of the oldest independent child welfare organisations in Victoria. It provides targeted services that include family support, sexual abuse counselling and treatment services, support services tailored for mothers, fathers and other carers, early education expertise, child and family centres, ChildFIRST and Services Connect referral services.

2. About this submission

This submission has been informed by the expertise of practitioners with many years experience working in the early childhood sector. It was developed following consultation with representatives of the following organisations:

- ◆ Anglicare Victoria
- ◆ Bethany Community Support
- ◆ Centacare
- ◆ Child and Family Services Ballarat
- ◆ Connections UnitingCare
- ◆ Family Care
- ◆ Family Life
- ◆ MacKillop Family Services
- ◆ Municipal Association of Victoria
- ◆ Tweddle Child and Family Health Service

Principles

The key principles that underscore this submission include:

- ◆ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which highlights the need for children to be protected and nurtured to the fullest extent possible by family and the community
- ◆ Child-centred practice that ensures the voices of children are heard and the needs of children are at the centre of practice
- ◆ Recognising the social and environmental barriers that disadvantaged children and families face in accessing high quality education and care that addresses their needs.

3. Strengths of The Education State – Early Childhood

The Centre and CPS commend the Victorian Government for their commitment to improve early childhood education and care for the most marginalised groups in our society. We welcome the Government’s commitment to improving Maternal and Child Health (MCH) and ECEC services and to furthering the national childcare debate.

The Centre and CPS support the key messages in the consultation paper, including DET’s recognition of the:

- ◆ critical importance of the early years in a child’s development
- ◆ increasing complexity and diversity of family needs
- ◆ need for earlier engagement in learning.

Our concerns

While the consultation paper is underpinned by sound principles, we note that key elements have been overlooked. Specifically:

- ◆ The role of Family Services as a key provider of ECEC services for vulnerable children and families and key supporter of the importance of early years development of children's growth has not been sufficiently recognised.
- ◆ While reference is made to early childhood, the focus of the paper is the pre-school stage in a child's development rather than the internationally recognised critically important 0-3 years of development that provides the foundation for a successful adult life.
- ◆ There is a strong focus on the role of kindergarten but little recognition of the key role that childcare can play in creating a rich learning and care environment for children.
- ◆ There is limited reference to the particular needs of Aboriginal or culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families and the need for culturally appropriate and safe programs.

4. What needs to change? – Our response

We have identified three key areas for reform:

- ◆ Improving the availability of and accessibility to early years services for vulnerable children and families
- ◆ Improving coordination between health, education and family services; and
- ◆ Strengthening the capacity and capability of the early years workforce to be able to better meet the needs of vulnerable children and families.

The extensive knowledge, experience and expertise of Family Services positions the sector as a key driver of ECEC reforms. However the Victorian Government needs to recognise the role of the sector as a key facilitator of change.

Areas for reforms include:

- ◆ *The need to improve availability and accessibility to services:*

In regional areas

Universal availability does not directly translate to universal accessibility, and universal services are not currently consistent across the state. Many vulnerable families are further disadvantaged by their location and vulnerable children in regional areas who have a health or development problem often cannot access treatment. For example, sector participants in our consultation identified that children needing speech therapy are often unable to access appropriate services due to the lack of speech therapists in regional areas.

Targeted programs for groups with particular needs

The benefits of kindergarten in providing early education and care and identifying developmental issues are widely known and recognised by the government. However, many vulnerable children, including children in Child Protection and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, miss out on targeted kindergarten programs in the year before school. This places them at a further disadvantage in relation to their peers in starting formal education.

Flexible and responsive programs

There is a need for greater investment in flexible programs that address the increased diversity and complexity of family needs in Victoria. This includes culturally inclusive programs and settings. Our consultation identified a number of programs that have been created in response to identified community needs and that are in high demand. However these are not sufficiently valued or funded and therefore cannot provide maximum benefit to the community.¹

Increased access to the Enhanced MCH programs

Enhanced MCH (EMCH) programs are constrained in their capacity to consistently and efficiently connect to other services. There are many examples of good practice in EMCH services but they need to be consistently delivered across the state. There is insufficient funding for targeted services to vulnerable groups, and a key way to address this is to increase EMCH programs and their capacity across Victoria.

- ◆ *The need to improve coordination between health, education and family services, particularly:*

Between MCH and family services

The statistics on attendance to MCH Key Ages and Stages checks are disheartening: ‘In 2014, a third of families did not attend this last visit, while half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children missed out’. Vulnerable families are more likely to miss out on these services than other families, and consequently miss out on the early intervention strategies and referral services that MCH visits provide. Given their work with vulnerable families in the antenatal and post-natal stages, family services are well equipped to work more closely with MCH nurses to deliver MCH services to vulnerable families. Expert practitioners in our consultation strongly argued that joint training of MCH and ECEC staff in family services would ensure continued engagement between vulnerable families and children and MCH programs, in an environment where families feel safe, comfortable and included.

Between existing ECEC programs and other government programs and strategies

The service system is currently fragmented and not able to deliver a seamless journey through the system for users. Families engaged in multiple services—including homelessness services, mental health services, and family services—experience a lack of connection and continuity across these. The Early Childhood policy needs to clearly articulate how it will align and integrate with other policy and strategic efforts currently occurring in the child and family services area. For example, while the Roadmap to Reform will outline key areas for reform in the prevention and early intervention areas—of which ECEC should be a key priority—it is unclear how these policies will align. It is unclear how ECEC will be a factor in the government’s primary prevention and early intervention strategies.

- ◆ *The need to improve the capacity and capability of the workforce to be able to better meet the needs of vulnerable children, young people and families*

Strengthen universal workforce in working with vulnerable cohorts

The workforce in the universal ECEC system wants to know how to work better to support vulnerable families and children. These workers are well equipped to provide more targeted

¹ See Appendix 1 for some examples of good practice programs.

support if they are further skilled through professional development. Quality ECEC requires practitioners with the skills and capacity to engage children and parents, and to be well supported in their work.

Strengthen engagement strategies

There is a clear need for engagement with vulnerable families and children to be a primary focus, particularly by improving capacity for outreach services. A lack of genuine engagement with vulnerable families and children results in their further disconnection from the community.

5. In summary

The Centre and CPS urge DET to develop a comprehensive ECEC policy that:

Acknowledges and values the role of the Family Services sector

- ◆ Family Services are key players in the continuum of ECEC service delivery for all vulnerable children and families in Victoria. Acknowledgment of the role of Family Services in ECEC is fundamental to the achievement of a robust early childhood health, development and learning system in Victoria and it should be recognised across ECEC policy and strategic documents.

Improves access to and availability of services for vulnerable families and children, by:

- ◆ **Improving engagement:** There is a clear need for engagement with vulnerable families and children to be a primary focus, particularly through improving capacity for outreach services. Lack of genuine engagement with vulnerable families and children results in their further disconnection from the community.
- ◆ **Increasing funding to flexible and responsive programs:** There is a need for investment in flexible programs that respond to the diverse and complex needs of vulnerable children and families, including addressing the availability of programs for families in regional areas.
- ◆ **Increasing inclusion:** Inclusive practices are crucial to improving relationships with vulnerable families. Sector participants highlighted the need to increase investment in integrated child and family centres that are focused and cater to the diverse needs of vulnerable families and children, including through the provision of culturally appropriate services and by having warm and welcoming spaces and staff.

Provides more funding to targeted programs for vulnerable families and children, including:

- ◆ **Joint training:** There needs to be a greater focus on making sure that vulnerable families and children receive MCH Key Ages and Stages checks. Given their work with vulnerable families in the antenatal and post-natal stages, family services are well equipped to work more closely with MCH nurses to deliver MCH services to vulnerable families. Sector participants were strongly of the view that joint training of MCH and ECEC staff in family services would ensure continued engagement between vulnerable families and children and MCH programs, in an environment where they feel safe, comfortable and included.

- ◆ **EMCH services:** EMCH programs are working over capacity and there is an urgent need to increase the capacity of EMCH services for vulnerable children and families and to improve their coordination with other ECEC programs, including Cradle to Kinder and other parenting support programs.
- ◆ **Continuing to fund the NPDI:** Serious concern was raised regarding the cutting of federal funding for the National Perinatal Depression Initiative (NPDI). The NPDI has been a successful and crucial program for mothers experiencing perinatal depression and participants highlighted the large gap that will be left in its wake at the end of the year if funding is not guaranteed.

Improves coordination and alignment of policies and services for vulnerable families and children, by:

- ◆ **Improving data sharing mechanisms:** The current fragmentation of the ECEC system is a key obstacle to the effective and efficient delivery of family services. Data sharing mechanisms and agreements need to be developed to enable seamless transitions for families between services.
- ◆ **Providing more support during transitions:** The transitional periods from childcare to kindergarten and kinder to primary school are challenging periods for vulnerable children and families; this area is currently not receiving adequate attention. A stronger focus on improved coordination of the connections and support for families is required to ensure seamless transitions for children.
- ◆ **Strengthening alignment and coordination with community needs:** Sector participants strongly recommended greater community coordination (between local council, government, community organisations, and members of the community and service users) to make sure services and programs are responding to the real and diverse needs of the community and vulnerable families and children.

6. Conclusion

The Centre and CPS appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the Education State Early Childhood consultation process.

We lastly reiterate the need for recognition of the valuable work of Family Services in the provision of early education and care, particularly in prevention and early intervention support services for vulnerable or potentially vulnerable children and families. Strengthening Family Services' ECEC programs is crucial to effectively meet the complex and diverse needs of vulnerable families.

We and our members hope to work further with DET on its ECEC reform agenda, including the development of early childhood policy and the implementation of changes in practice.

Appendix 1: Examples of good practice programs

A number of good practice early childhood education and care programs operate in Victoria. Child and Family Services are particularly well placed to provide these services, particularly to families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage. The provision of early parenting services and early learning opportunities is a crucial part of prevention and early intervention strategies for vulnerable families and children. It is important the Victorian Government recognises the good practice in the sector, to make sure that it is emulated across Victoria instead of creating new programs.

NEWPIN (the New Parent Infant Network)

NEWPIN is an early parenting program run by many of the child and family services organisations who participated in our consultation. It is a program for mothers and their pre-school children that aims to improve the parent-child relationship and strengthen parenting skills and self-esteem. Referrals to NEWPIN are often through ChildFIRST, and the program works to break the cycle of destructive family behaviour through therapeutic structured play, group work and activities.

The evaluation of the Bethany Community Support NEWPIN program showed improvements in families' social connectedness and early learning engagement, improvements in parents' understanding of child development, and a high level of flexibility in the program to adapt to the complex and fluid needs of families. These types of dynamic, therapeutic programs are crucial to prevention and early intervention strategies in the early childhood education and care system for at-risk and vulnerable families.

Cradle to Kinder (C2K)

Cradle to Kinder is an antenatal and postnatal case management and support service that provides intensive family and early parenting support to vulnerable young mothers and their children. Referrals are usually made by ChildFIRST or Child Protection and the program is provided by different agencies in different areas. It works with parents of children 0-4 years of age (predominantly women under 25 years of age), and aims to build capacity of parents to support and promote their child's health, safety and development.

The benefits of C2K are most evident in their multidisciplinary approach that builds on the expertise and collaboration of multiple practitioners to address the complex needs of families and children. The program integrates the work of support workers, youth workers, and maternal and child health nurses to provide a holistic, community-based program that offers further supports through strong engagement strategies, including home visits.

Supported Playgroups

Supported playgroups (such as the CPS Play Box Playgroup or Shine and Grow with Berry Street) are targeted programs for families experiencing family violence, trauma, mental illness, social isolation, disability or intergenerational poverty. Targeted playgroups that utilise specialist skills, knowledge and experience are necessary to effectively address the issues facing vulnerable families and children. While their focus is predominantly on social engagement and play, parenting supports and education provide additional supports necessary for parents to understand child development, and improve parent-child relations and confidence, as well as providing links to other health professionals and community networks.