

Investing in children's development: The importance of early relationships

Position Paper



Recent research into brain development in young children has highlighted the importance of secure and supportive relationships for children's healthy development. Children that have secure relationships with their parents¹ are more able to regulate their own emotions, learn through exploration and cope with difficulties when they arise. This gives them the resilience and skills needed for success at school and in later life.

This paper outlines why it is so important for families, workers and communities to support children's early development through warm, nurturing care, particularly for children living in families and communities that are under stress because of poverty, violence and discrimination.

This paper looks at some of The Benevolent Society's programs that help parents, early childhood workers and communities strengthen their relationships with children. All of these programs have helped overcome disadvantage and set vulnerable children on a path to success. Policy and practice directions that are needed to support children's growth and resilience are also discussed.

About The Benevolent Society

The Benevolent Society is Australia's oldest charity. Established in 1813 we have been caring for Australians and their communities for nearly 200 years. We are a secular, non-profit, independent organisation working to bring about positive social change in response to community needs. Our purpose is to create caring and inclusive communities and a just society.

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¹ This paper uses the word 'parent' to refer to anyone raising a child. That might include adoptive parents, grandparents, foster carers and so on.

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1 Introduction

Australia's recent Intergenerational Report (Australian Treasury, 2010) highlights the need to increase Australia's productivity if we are to address the challenges of an ageing population. So far the focus has been on encouraging older workers to stay in the workforce longer. The Benevolent Society is also urging governments to place greater emphasis on realising the potential of all of our children by providing high quality early childhood programs, and building the capacity of individuals and communities to assist children's development.

Recent Australian research has indicated that around one quarter of children are struggling in some areas of development by the time they reach school (AEDI, 2009). Failing to maximise the potential of one quarter of the next generation does not make sense if we are to increase Australia's productivity.

Where children live has a significant impact on their development. The children who are struggling most are those who live in the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities and in very remote areas of Australia, Indigenous children and children who are not proficient in English (AEDI, 2009).

We know that disadvantage in Australia is concentrated in particular communities. Research has found that 1.7 per cent of postcodes and communities across Australia account for more than seven times their share of the major factors that are associated with inter-generational poverty (Vinson, 2007). These factors include leaving school early, low income, long-term unemployment and child maltreatment.

English research has made a stark link between poverty and children's outcomes in school (Feinstein, 2007). The study found that children from a low socio-economic background who were performing well at the start of school went backwards as they progressed through schooling, in comparison with those who were more affluent and performing well who continued to do well. Children that were struggling at the start of school also had different trajectories based on wealth – those who were wealthier improved, while those who were not wealthy failed to progress.

These findings have now been echoed in Australian research. Studies using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children

The Australian Early Childhood Development Index (AEDI, 2009) measures five domains of early childhood development: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, school based language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge. AEDI checklists were completed for 97.5% of all children in their first year of school (261,203 children). The results show that 76.6% of children are adapting well to school and making good progress in the new learning environment. However, 23.5% are developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the AEDI domains and 11.8% are developmentally vulnerable on two or more of the domains. Children living in remote locations and in the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities are more likely to be vulnerable across the AEDI domains. Almost half (47.4%) of Australia's Indigenous children are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain. Children who are not proficient in English are also more likely to be vulnerable on one or more of the AEDI domains.

(LSAC) reveal that children from low income families show the poorest developmental outcomes. There are also consistent findings that children's school outcomes are lowest where poverty has persisted across generations. The Benevolent Society is concerned that Australian children who grow up in poorer communities are at risk of failing to meet their potential simply because of where they happen to live. We urge governments to focus greater policy effort on the healthy development of young children in Australia's most disadvantaged communities.

The 2009 Australian Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) found that while most 4-5 year old children (95%) attend some type of child care or early education program, this varies according to family circumstances. Mothers of children not attending an early childhood program are less well educated and more likely to be unemployed; have a lower weekly income; have more financial stress; have larger numbers of children living in the household; reside in less advantaged neighbourhoods; and are likely to be from an Indigenous, non-English speaking or lone parent background. The number of hours spent in an early childhood program was also linked to mothers' education, family income and employment, with children from poorer backgrounds spending fewer hours in a program. The LSAC study found that 20% of children only started attending an early childhood program at the age of four.



2 Early brain development

- **Children's experiences of early relationships shape how they learn to regulate their emotions and their openness to learning.**
- **Neglect, stress and trauma in early life can have long lasting effects that are difficult to overcome later.**
- **Australian investment in children must be focused on the early years: we cannot afford to postpone investment until school age or adulthood.**

At birth, children's brains are only about one quarter the size of an adult brain, growing to about 90% by the age of four. The neural pathways built in these early years are the foundation for our ongoing learning. As our learning experiences repeat, the neural pathways become stronger, allowing us to master early skills such as talking and walking. Each new skill builds upon earlier skills, forming foundations for increasingly complex thought.

Neuroscientists once believed that development of these pathways only occurred during early childhood, but now there is evidence that so-called 'neuroplastic' changes happen throughout life. This is good news as it means that we can continue to learn throughout our lives, but undoing the damage that anxiety and neglect has on a child's brain is difficult. Getting the foundations right in our early years is much more effective, and less costly to individuals and society, than trying to fix things later.

Brain development is progressive, with a number of specific periods of new growth. Our social and emotional pathways are laid down during the early years when there is sufficient stimulation to the brain's limbic system to regulate emotions. Children's experiences of early relationships shape how they learn to regulate their emotions and their openness to learning. Warm and nurturing relationships support a child's need to feel

secure and their confidence to explore the environment and learn. Having a secure base with nurturing adults makes it possible to have these positive learning experiences and to keep building skills.

In contrast, children without this secure base who face neglect, stress and trauma in early life can have inhibited growth of neural connections in the brain. When children are under stress for long periods, the neural pathways which support the regulation of emotion fail to develop, making it more difficult to establish and strengthen these connections as the child grows. The long term impacts of the failure to develop foundational brain pathways that regulate emotion increases children's susceptibility to physical and mental illness, creates problems in interacting with others, decreases the capacity to learn and ultimately to function as an independent adult in the future

Given this research, it is clear that investing in young children must be an Australian priority. Yet currently, Australia spends significantly more on older children than younger children: for every dollar spent on a child under six years, roughly \$1.50 is spent on a child aged 6 to 17 years (OECD, 2009)². The early years are vital for early learning and long term wellbeing: we cannot afford to postpone investing in children until they reach school age or adulthood.

² The OECD report covered four types of public spending at the national level: cash benefits and tax breaks for social purposes (eg Family Tax Benefit, Baby Bonus), services in-kind (eg family planning services, foster parent payments), child care and education.

3 The importance of good quality early childhood education

Early childhood education and care offers "a rare opportunity to mitigate the effects of poverty and disadvantage" on children (UNICEF, 2008).

- **Services that combine good quality early education and care with health services and parenting support improve children's cognitive and social development.**
- **One in five Australian children do not attend any form of early childhood program until the age of four.**
- **Australia needs a system of early education and care that includes strategies to reach those children who aren't attending any early childhood programs.**

There is increasing evidence that access to good quality³ early childhood programs from an early age, together with programs that increase parents' capacity to assist children's learning, can make a significant difference to children's life chances.

A major UK study, the *Effective Provision of Preschool Education*, found that all children benefited from preschool, with disadvantaged children benefiting most (Sylva et al., 2004). The study found that preschools that also offered health and family support services were the most effective in promoting both intellectual and social development. Programs that increased the take-up of preschool places by parents who usually would not send their children to preschool, provided those children with a better start to school.

We know from longitudinal research that this type of early intervention increases the likelihood of children doing well at school, gaining employment and having successful and fulfilling relationships. In contrast, not assisting all children to reach their full potential has significant social costs with

higher unemployment, increased likelihood of crime and imprisonment, increased mental health problems and poorer physical health.

In light of this research, it is of great concern that one in five Australian children are not attending an early childhood program until the age of four, and that attendance at some form of child care is significantly lower for children who live in poorer communities (LSAC, 2009).

There are a number of possible reasons for this lack of participation. Australia's early childhood system gives priority of access to children of parents that are studying, working or who have been identified in the child protection system. Child care fees, even with subsidies from government, are expensive for people on low and modest incomes, particularly if a parent is not working. In addition, some families face physical and psychological barriers that prevent them from accessing early childhood services. The services may be physically hard to get to when relying on public transport. They may feel culturally unwelcoming or 'exclusive' for some parents.

³ The factors affecting quality include staff qualifications and training, child:staff ratios, caregiver stability (staff retention) and approaches to care that focus on relationships and the importance of play.

Early childhood care and education in Australia is not universally available. Child care has been historically seen in policy terms as a labour force issue, enabling women to return to work, rather than as an educational and developmental necessity. There are very few free public early childhood services, and the vast majority of child care centres, preschools and kindergartens are privately operated by non-profit organisations or commercial businesses. Availability varies from state to state: very few of the preschools in New South Wales are attached to a public primary school, in contrast to the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory (Elliott, 2006).

It is clear that early education and care programs offer long term benefits to the children who attend them. Research shows that these benefits are magnified for disadvantaged children, so it is vital that greater efforts are made to reach those children who are not attending any early childhood program. There is an urgent need for action so that all Australian children can have access to high-quality early education and care, and Australian society can ultimately reap the benefits.



4 The importance of secure relationships and a good quality home learning environment

- **Secure relationships with nurturing adults help children regulate their emotions and withstand the stresses of daily life long into adulthood.**
- **A home environment that gives a child positive learning experiences can buffer against the negative influences of poverty.**

Relationships with adults in the early years are critical to children's long term outcomes. While it is possible to overcome poor early life experiences, it becomes harder to do so if we continue to be exposed to negative relationships and stressful events. A child's capacity to control his own emotional state appears to hinge on biological systems shaped by her early experiences and relationships. A strong, secure relationship with a nurturing adult can have a protective biological function, helping a growing child withstand the ordinary stress of daily life.

Infants become securely attached to adults who are sensitive and responsive to them in the first years of life. Children use these adults as a secure base to explore from and return to, for reassurance and comfort when needed. The work of Mary Ainsworth in the 1960s, and more recently Dr Robert Marvin and others, has helped our understanding of how children interact with and attach to caregivers. Ainsworth helped to identify the consequences for children and parents who did not have secure attachments, and subsequent research has confirmed the impact on children's learning and behaviours where they have poor attachment with caregivers.

While much of the research has focused on the parent-child relationship, there is some evidence that children form multiple attachment relationships, including with their day care caregivers (Sims, 2009). Studies have found that a secure child-teacher relationship in preschool can compensate for,

or buffer against, inconsistent and chaotic care-giving experiences at home (Howes, 1999; Mitchell-Copeland et al., 1997). This last study also found links between secure child-teacher relationships and improved pro-social behaviours (such as sharing, helping and cooperating) and social competence in children.

A positive home learning environment can also provide a buffer against the negative influences of poverty and low levels of maternal education (Sylva et al., 2004; Goodman, A. & Gregg, P., 2010). Activities at home that can have a positive effect include reading with children, playing with letters and numbers, painting and drawing, and creating opportunities for play with friends. Thus a poor mother with few qualifications can make a significant difference to her child's social and cognitive development.

5 Working with individuals and communities to support children's development: some promising programs

It is reasonable to suggest, given what we know from the AEDI, LSAC and Vinson data, that we risk around one quarter of Australian children failing to reach their potential not because of inherited abilities but because of the circumstances in which they are growing up.

The Benevolent Society has examined the evidence for how best to support young children's healthy development. We concluded that to be most effective we should work at three different levels - with parents, with service providers, and with whole communities - to focus on secure relationships and healthy development. While broader goals to overcome disadvantage will require a range of policy and program responses, we believe a significant difference can be made by assisting the critical early brain development that builds children's capacity to learn.

This section outlines some of The Benevolent Society's programs that have shown early success in supporting young children's healthy development through building warm, nurturing relationships. While The Benevolent Society runs a range of programs that focus on young children's relationships, this paper highlights three that have been recently evaluated.

5.1 Partnerships in Early Childhood

Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC) is a program run by The Benevolent Society in conjunction with child care and preschool organisations in NSW and Queensland. Through staff development and support for parents, PIEC aims to improve the quality of early education and care and, in so doing, enhance children's social and emotional development. The focus is on building

nurturing and supportive relationships between children and adults.

It is a model that blends early education, good quality care and parenting support. It is based on research such as attachment theory and early brain development that tells us how important it is for children's long term outcomes that they experience secure, nurturing relationships in their first few years. PIEC aims to improve the quality of care - not through potentially costly structural changes or regulatory standards (such as staff:child ratios) but by addressing how staff and parents interact with children.

PIEC operates in 18 child care/preschool centres in NSW (funded by the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) and 2 centres in Queensland (funded by the Queensland Department of Education and Training, Office for Early Childhood Education and Care). It is run in partnership with Campbelltown City Council, Centacare Gold Coast Child care Services, Gosford City Council, Kinburra Preschool, KU Children's Services, Lady Gowrie Child Centre, Long Jetty Preschool, MyKindy Gold Coast Child care Services, Peninsula & District Family Day Care, Peninsula Occasional Care, Samaritans, The Entrance Preschool, Toukley Preschool and Wunanbiri Preschool. On Queensland's North Gold Coast PIEC is also operating a consultative model, with advice, training and support services available to child care centres in the area.

PIEC staff work with child care centre staff

⁴ Circle of Security is a model of early intervention designed to alter a young child's developmental pathway. It was designed by Glen Cooper, Kent Hoffman and Bert Powell from the Marycliff Institute, Washington, and Robert Marvin from the University of Virginia.

and with parents to build their understanding of, and sensitivity to, children's behavioural cues that might signal emotional distress (often called antisocial behaviour). Together they develop strategies for supporting the children's developmental needs.

Strategies include rostering centre staff to be available in specific 'playspaces' at pick-up and drop-off times - when children are most vulnerable and need reassurance - in a way that is predictable to children. This is based on the Circle of Security approach: the worker becomes a secure base from which children can explore their world, safe in the knowledge that the worker remains a safe haven to which they can return. Playspaces are a change in practice for most centres, and can be challenging for staff as they are required to be emotionally available to all children and some may feel that they are not being busy or productive enough. PIEC also uses video recordings to help staff 'see' children's

developmental needs. By analysing videoed interactions between children and between children and staff, staff learn to notice when children are seeking reassurance and how to provide this in the context of a busy child care centre.

PIEC also works directly with parents. Parents can access parent education sessions at the child care centres before and after work, and can also have individual support sessions with the worker who might use the video recordings in those sessions. Thus parents learn to recognise the emotional needs that exist behind children's behaviour and develop strategies that they can use at home to support their child's development. Through this work with parents, the program extends the quality of children's early learning and care to the home environment.



5.1.1 Outcomes of PIEC

The Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales evaluated PIEC using a longitudinal design that tested children at four points in time between March 2006 and November 2007. The evaluation found that PIEC had a significant impact on children's social and emotional development. There were decreases in children's peer problems (such as bullying), conduct problems (such as lying or fighting), and increases in pro-social behaviour (such as helping others). There were also improvements in relationships between the children and adults involved in PIEC. The most notable change was an increase in the closeness between children and staff in some of the centres, indicating a more secure attachment between staff and children.

There were improvements in the quality of care at participating centres, as shown by children's improved behaviours and interactions while at the centre, and lower levels of distress when separating from parents in the morning.

Parents reported that PIEC helped them learn about their child's development, and taught them new skills about how to play with and teach their child. There was overwhelming support for the program, with parents indicating that PIEC helped them learn about their child's development, and taught them new skills about how to play with and teach their child.

The main area for improvement highlighted in the evaluation report is in strengthening families' connections to their local community. Further extensions of the program model could include intensive outreach to engage families that are not using early childhood services.

5.2 Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services (SBCS)

SBCS was a two year project (2006-08) operating in South East Sydney that built on the theory and practice evidence that had informed the development of PIEC. The project was a partnership between The Benevolent Society and Lady Gowrie Centre. It was funded through the Families NSW initiative.

The project provided professional development in 'strengths based practice' for directors of child care/preschool centres. Strengths based practice is a way of working with people that complements their existing strengths and resources, rather than focusing on the correction of deficits. It is an approach that encourages families to respond favourably to services and interventions.

Directors were trained in areas such as family-centred practice, attachment theory and the Circle of Security model. They also took part in monthly reflective learning circles to help them implement their learnings by sharing practical strategies, reflecting on their practice and looking at how to drive and manage change in their centre. SBCS published a quarterly newsletter on strengths based practice for early childhood practitioners, containing case studies and practical tools. A conference brought together practitioners from a range of early childhood fields.

5.2.1 Outcomes of SBCS

The Benevolent Society evaluated the SBCS project using feedback from participants via an online survey and focus groups, and training session feedback sheets.

The vast majority of participants reported an increased understanding of strengths based

practice, with most choosing to implement this way of working in their centre. Many reported a positive change in the work culture in their centre, with staff better able to cope with the stresses of their daily work. Directors and staff were communicating more positively with families, including those with complex needs.

Like other initiatives to support early childhood staff in professional development, the project found that there are significant structural barriers to staff forming good relationships with parents including a lack of time, resources and adequate training; staff turnover; and parents' expectations of services.

One of the success factors of the SBCS model was the provision of funding for relief staff that enabled centre directors to attend the learning circles each month, giving them the time and space to share strategies and reflect on their practice. The working relationships that emerged as a result of the learning circles were strong and long-lasting. Participants felt that barriers such as different funding models and awards, or private and community services, had been broken down.

5.2.2 Aboriginal Children's Services Strategy

The SBCS project was extended to two Aboriginal children's services in the region. Those services, and other Aboriginal stakeholders, were involved in developing a culturally appropriate version of the project. The process of the Aboriginal Children's Services Strategy was organic, with an emphasis on consultation, building relationships and adapting the approach according to the needs of each centre.

The Aboriginal Children's Services Strategy started later than the SBCS project and so was not part of the evaluation. Feedback from both services indicates an increased awareness of their role in supporting families, increased team communication and increased morale. As a result of taking part in this project, one of the Aboriginal services is now working in partnership with The Benevolent Society as part of the Partnerships in Early Childhood Program.

5.3 Communities for Children

Communities for Children (C4C) is a prevention and early intervention program which aims to improve young children's health, safety and wellbeing in disadvantaged communities. It is informed by research that highlights the importance of a child's local community to their wellbeing, such as the quality of social, health, educational and recreational facilities and the social relationships that families have.

Funded by the Commonwealth Government, the program runs in 45 disadvantaged geographic areas around Australia. Initially focused on children aged 0-5, the program was extended to reach children up to 12 years. The Benevolent Society runs C4C in the Rosemeadow and Ambarvale areas of Campbelltown and in the Southern Lakes area of the Central Coast.

In each area the program works with the whole community rather than specific families. One of its goals is to improve the community environment in which children grow up. In each area an NGO Facilitating Partner collaborates with local organisations (Community Partners) to deliver a range of activities, guided by parents and families as to the activities needed and how those activities should be delivered and managed. This collaboration is at the heart of the C4C model.

It begins with planning the activities according to local needs, involves ongoing advisory committees, and might include Community Partners jointly delivering services.

The strategies implemented vary from area to area, in line with local needs. The following are three examples of activities developed in The Benevolent Society's areas.

Street Treats in Rosemeadow, run by UnitingCare Burnside, was designed to target those families who appeared not to be accessing any other forms of support - those who were slipping through the net. Street Treats was a playgroup that took place in residential areas, including both public and private housing estates, rather than in a centre. The streets were chosen because they had a high number of 0-5 year olds living there and high levels of conflict and tension (based on data from Department of Housing NSW). Participating families reported that they were sometimes "not brave enough" to attend pre-school, or avoided settings in which they might feel discriminated against.

The Yummy Café in Ambarvale, run by the YWCA, serves low cost meals and offers activities such as playgroups, parenting groups, story time and a toy/book library. The café environment encourages participation because it is informal and families need not feel intimidated. The setting is also appealing as it offers child care, and a safe play area for children.

Bringing up Kids - It's the Little Things that Matter was a project run by Frazer Howard and Partners in the Southern Lakes area. The project provided parents with both practical support and resources to help them understand their child's developmental needs. A wide range of activities and resources included an under 5s book club from which

parents could borrow books, musical activities and resources, and a kids' art wall. All were made available through the existing community infrastructure such as shopping centres, playgroups and primary schools.

5.3.1 Outcomes of C4C

A national evaluation of the program was undertaken by the Social Policy Research Centre, and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, published in 2009. It found that parents felt more effective in their role as parents, there was improved engagement of families who were previously disengaged from early childhood services, and fewer children were living in jobless households in the C4C areas compared to non-C4C areas.

The Benevolent Society also undertook an evaluation of its own two local programs during 2005-2009. A mixed methodology was used with an emphasis on in-depth qualitative interviews, surveys, focus groups and interviews with Community Partners, parents and external stakeholders.

Parents reported feeling less isolated, better able to cope with the demands of parenting, equipped with new parenting skills and having a better understanding of early childhood. They also felt empowered by the collaborative and inclusive approach of the program.

The program improved the accessibility of early learning and care. Existing activities and services were bolstered, and more activities were on offer with families more likely to access them. For example, Street Treats in Campbelltown saw an increase from 2% to 35% of parents reporting that their children attended day care. The quality of care was also improved through the provision of early learning resources which enabled parents to continue their children's learning in the home. On a community-level the program helped

to make the local communities more child-friendly. This was achieved through the development of infrastructure such as parks and play areas, as well as strengthened community capacity. The evaluation found that while some activities would not be sustainable without ongoing funding, many stakeholders reported that C4C had organised infrastructure and resources which would have long-term use.

Community Partners reported that collaboration in their area had increased significantly with the C4C program, facilitating new links between organisations. It was also felt that competition for funding between local organisations had been reduced, improving working relationships.

The evaluation suggested that the main way in which C4C could be strengthened would be by allowing time and resources to reach those families that are not accessing any form of support. Whilst the program was able to break down physical barriers such as lack of transport, building trust and breaking down negative perceptions about services requires long term work.

5.4 Implications from these programs

The programs described build on and are integrated within the existing service system, making them a cost effective way of delivering focused assistance to children's development.

By working to support changes in the day-to-day practices of existing services, or by developing community capacity and infrastructure, these programs are a long term, sustainable approach to bringing about change.

These programs emphasise the need for both practice and cultural change in early childhood services, so that children's relationships are supported for learning and parents are engaged and linked to other services. Professional development in the early childhood field requires positions to be backfilled or must take place out-of-hours, so services need support, time and extra resources for this to be successfully achieved.

All the programs described rely heavily on partnerships with other service providers and local government. Collaboration at the planning and delivery stages of such programs are vital.

The programs described emphasise the need for a range of strategies to meet the needs of those families who do not use any early childhood services. Well-designed assertive outreach strategies are vital if we are to increase children's uptake of early learning and care programs.

6 Policy and practice recommendations

This paper has outlined a range of approaches to supporting children's early development through service delivery. In addition, good outcomes for children need to be addressed within a policy context. The Benevolent Society welcomes the increased focus on early childhood development that has emerged over recent years at both a federal and state level, and acknowledges the changes that are taking place as a result. However, we urge that more be done to realise the potential of all of our children.

6.1 Government leadership and funding

If we are to improve the outcomes for all Australia's children, and our future society as a whole, there needs to be an understanding and appreciation among all Australians of the fundamental importance of the early period of human development. Federal and state governments need to lead this culture shift and make early care and education a high public priority.

We urge government to:

- Focus on improving outcomes for children in the most disadvantaged communities, including addressing poverty through improvements to income security, skills development and infrastructure. This includes investing in programs (such as Communities for Children) that work collaboratively to plan and deliver services in areas of high need.
- Establish early years centres, particularly in the most disadvantaged communities, that offer integrated early education and care, family support, and child and maternal health services.
- Create a universal system of good quality early education and care that is given the same priority as the school education system. The Benevolent Society supports the Council of Australian Government's early childhood education and care quality reforms, and calls for the following further steps:
 - make preschool education free for all children aged three years and up in all states and territories
 - introduce pay parity for early childhood teachers with primary and secondary teachers; this recognises that 'education' and 'care' are of equal value in children's development
 - improve staff-child ratios in early childhood services across Australia
 - commit funding to support access to quality early learning and care for disadvantaged children; it is vital that the costs of reform to the sector are not passed on to disadvantaged families.
- Provide mobile kindergartens in disadvantaged areas to increase the uptake of preschool provision by disadvantaged families, and to help strengthen home learning environments.
- In addition to improving the quality of early learning and care through improving staff qualifications and staff-child ratios, increase the focus on children's social and emotional development by expanding programs such as the Partnerships in Early Childhood program.
- Establish a national paid parental leave scheme which gives parents access to 52 weeks paid leave.

6.2 Service planning and design

The Benevolent Society's own program evaluations echo the wealth of research that highlights the importance of well planned, well designed services for children's outcomes.

We urge government to:

- Take a more integrated approach to service planning and delivery, at a federal, state and local level, so that families have better access to a range of services and fewer children 'fall through the cracks'.
- Develop funding models (like that for Communities for Children) that give service providers the ability to undertake long-term planning and the flexibility to tailor their services according to local needs.

6.3 At a practice level

Improved practices within early childhood services have been shown to have a positive impact on children's cognitive, social and emotional outcomes.

We urge service delivery organisations and educational institutions to:

- Provide opportunities for early childhood staff from all disciplines to undertake ongoing professional development and reflective practice in areas such as the practice implications of brain research, attachment theory and practice, and strengths based practice. These subject areas should also be included in course curricula at TAFE and university level.
- Support the development of effective home learning environments by communicating with parents, involving

them in their children's learning and wherever possible including outreach strategies in service planning.

- Draw on the knowledge and expertise of other disciplines to improve outcomes for children. By, for example, inviting an early childhood nurse and speech therapist to attend a playgroup, agencies can achieve a form of integrated service delivery that benefits families.



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