



POLICY BRIEF

Translating early childhood research evidence to inform policy and practice

Early years care and education

Children learn and develop through a combination of experiences, within and outside the family home. This Policy Brief explores the distinction that is often made about the role of care and education in children's services and highlights the importance of the interwoven nature of care and education.

For the purpose of this Policy Brief, 'children's services' is used as the inclusive phrase for child care and preschool/kindergarten for children aged birth to school entry.

Why is this issue important?

When considering care and education for young children, it is often assumed that this refers to separate and distinctive entities of children's services, focused *either* on the provision of child care *or* preschool/kindergarten. This distinction between care and education is misleading – children are learning constantly, regardless of the setting (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007). "Every moment in which an adult provides care to a young infant is a moment rich with learning" (Lally, 2007). Segregation of the provision of care and education into service 'types' therefore has short and long term consequences for children, families and the economy at large (Elliot, 2006; McCain & Mustard, 1999).

Separate histories and traditions of early childhood 'care' and 'education' programs

have resulted in substantially different goals, purposes and practices in child care and preschool/kindergarten services (Elliot, 2006).

Service provision has developed over time in response to social demand (refer to boxed text below). "The very rapid and unplanned expansion of child care services in the last decade has put enormous pressure on the system to deliver places while guaranteeing good quality care" (ACCI, 2007). Consequently, the delivery of distinctive service types offering either 'care' or 'education' programs has continued, with little consideration of the research literature on early child development, nor of the evolving needs of children and families and how this may affect service delivery.

Preschool/kindergarten

- Preschools/kindergartens for three and four year olds were first established in the late 19th century. After an initial period during which kindergarten services were embraced by educated middle class parents, provision of services became focused on the perceived need to 'redeem the children of working class parents'.
- Preschools/Kindergartens became popular in the 1950s and 1960s as families sought enhanced preparation for school and a break from day to day parenting.
- The Commonwealth Government commenced funding kindergartens/preschools in 1970s with balance provided by states and territories.
- Today children aged 3-4 years attend preschool/kindergarten on either a sessional or full-time basis.

Child care

- Child care evolved as charitable welfare services in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to improve health and nutrition of children from very poor or destitute families.
- Women's workforce participation and the subsequent demands for access to child care have seen a shift in Commonwealth funding directions. Funding has switched to child care which accommodates typical working hours, rather than preschools/kindergartens offering primarily sessional programs.
- Today the growth in child care is occurring in the private-for profit sector.

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Children's services should provide comprehensive developmental programs that integrate both care and education, for children from birth to school entry. There is now strong research evidence that experiences in the early years predict performance during the school years and beyond (ACCI, 2007). Despite this, care and education programs are not universally available or accessible to every child in the early years (Elliot, 2006).

What does the research tell us?

Family life is both diverse and complex and the variety of children's services available is equally diverse and complex. There is "little agreement on service types, functions or terminology as well as a mishmash of funding and regulations" (Elliot, 2006). Children's services remain inconsistent, un-coordinated and fragmented, involving different systems in each of the states and territories with significant variations in government responsibility (Pannell, 2005). This inconsistency is demonstrated in the approach to child care and preschool/ kindergarten services and conveys to both staff and parents that service provision differs depending on the sign on the door. The current debate about early child care and education wrestles with many questions:

- "...should [services] be social care for children, [provide] care for children whose parents go out to work, or [function as] the first stage of the education system?"
- Are they to aim to provide the best possible start for every child or simply to ensure children are safe and healthy, offering cover for parents' hours of work, or to provide parental support, education and development, including community development?" (Pugh & Duffy, 2006).

However, the underlying question that should be asked is: What can be done to ensure that all children and families have the opportunity to access high quality care and education in order to achieve best outcomes for all children and meet the contemporary and diverse needs of every families?

All children are influenced by the quality of the care and education they experience. While high quality environments are related to positive developmental outcomes, poor quality environments are related to adverse outcomes and pose a risk to children's development (CCCH, Policy Brief 2, 2006). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) UK study involving an array

of children's services, demonstrates that all children from all socio-economic groups benefit from some time spent in high quality children's services from age 3 (Sammons et al, 2007; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2003). The benefits brought to children's development were similar for both socio-economically and educationally advantaged and disadvantaged groups alike. Children from disadvantaged families benefited significantly from quality preschool experiences, especially where they were with a mixture of children from different social backgrounds. Benefits of high quality programs are further maximised for disadvantaged or marginalised families when parent support and involvement was also provided (Ellis, 2005; Press, 2006).

The potential benefits of high quality children's services have led many educational economists to argue that governments are not investing enough in early years care and education (OECD, 2007). Nordic countries such as Denmark, Norway and Sweden lead the way in investing in children's services for children aged 0-3 years (1.7-2.0% of GDP), compared with Australia which invests significantly less. It is therefore not surprising that "many Australian children miss out on early childhood development and educational opportunities" (Elliot, 2006), particularly disadvantaged families, whereby family capacity dictates child participation. Equity of access to children's services remains an issue for many families (Tayler et al, 2002). Many parents are working longer hours and require daily access to children's services for extended hours. Parents not involved in the workforce may also require access for their children but are inhibited by service availability and financial restraints. Children attending child care may experience difficulty in accessing preschool/kindergarten due to the sessional nature of the service system. Poor access to children's services increases social inequality and costs to children, parents and in the long term, the economy (Tayler, 2007).

The provision of high quality services is a challenge for government. In Australia, over half (51.3%) of staff working in children's services do not hold a base qualification in early childhood (OECD, 2006). However, research clearly points to the positive impact of training on high quality service provision (CCCH, Policy Brief 2, 2006).

There are also framework variations within services, which depend on differing understandings about young children and the role of the services (Pugh & Duffy, 2006).

The OECD Policy Brief (2007) addressing Lifelong Learning and Human Capital highlights the success of the Nordic system of children's services which "take a holistic approach to children, closely integrating care with education and working to ensure that children enjoy a smooth transition to primary school". This system is "geared to the playful ways in which very young children learn".

"Every moment in which an adult provides care to a young infant is a moment rich with learning..." (Lally, 2007)

The role of parents is also an important part of the care and education equation. All early childhood experiences including those in the family setting, influence a child's development. Families are the child's first and most important teachers and the greatest influence on his or her development (Press, 2006). Nurturing caregiver-child relationships have universal features across cultures, regardless of different child care practices. They are characterised by children being well fed, kept safe, given consistent affection, responsiveness, conversation, stimulation and opportunities to learn about the world (Arnold et al, 2006). Children who are given this support have fewer behavioural issues and enhanced thinking and reasoning skills by the time they are school age (Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000).

The EPPE Project (Sylva et al, 2004) show that parent-child interaction through activities such as reading, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, painting and drawing, playing with numbers and letters was more strongly associated with children's intellectual and social development than either parental education or occupation. Therefore, parents and others in the community providing care and education for children require both recognition and support. Early childhood professionals need to be acknowledged as the substitute teachers and carers of a child, during the period those children attend their services. Early childhood practitioners play an important role in supporting parents who ultimately want the best outcomes for their children.

Balancing family, work commitments and providing young children with quality early years experiences are challenges for all parents (Press, 2006). Support to parents must also be extended to educating parents about the importance of the parent-child interaction and that learning occurs both within and outside the home. Therefore, the provision of accessible relevant information

for parents about: nurturing and play-based parent-child interaction, the importance of the early years, child development and, child behaviour remains, a priority (CCCH, 2004).

What are the implications of this research?

- Historically early years care and education has evolved in response to the existing social environment. Contemporary knowledge of the importance of the early years suggests that action is needed to ensure that every child's development, learning and wellbeing is supported through high quality early childhood service provision.
- Separating care and education in the early years fails to acknowledge the interwoven nature of early learning and development.
- It is the quality and nature of the relationship/s children experience throughout their day, regardless of the setting, that are critical for children's development. Children learn constantly and do not differentiate whether they are in a setting for care or learning. Therefore every person who interacts with a child, regardless of their professional background, needs to know how to attend to and meet that child's care and learning needs.
- The current early childhood service framework is confusing for parents in regards to the service types available, and adds financial, emotional, occupational and time pressures on parents who seek access to appropriate service/s to ensure their children are exposed to both care and education environments.
- The lack of accessible high quality care and education services has long term consequences for children and Australia - developmentally, socially and economically. This is particularly the case for children of disadvantaged, marginalised and remote families.
- The delivery of high quality care and education in children's services that aim to provide the best possible outcomes for children is dependent upon staff being equipped with appropriate skills and qualifications.
- The role of parents in supporting and fostering learning and development of children, especially in the first three years, is crucial in promoting positive outcomes for children.

Considerations for policy and programs

- Recognise that for young children, care and education are inseparable, regardless of the age of the child and the type of service.
- Develop and implement a core early childhood play-based framework for all children's services across Australia, recognising the interwoven nature of care and education that:
 - is based on a foundation of common goals
 - provides age-appropriate quality care and education for their child from birth to school entry, within the one service
 - eliminates the need for parents to enrol their child in more than one service at a time (e.g. child day care and preschool/kindergarten), so that their children can receive preschool education from age 3 years
 - eliminates the distinction between child care and preschool/kindergarten within an early childhood service setting
 - educates parents about the common approach of all services which aim to deliver an integrated early childhood framework
- Accept that integration of care and education services for early childhood includes:
 - upskilling and training early childhood service providers in combined core competences of care – nurturing and responsive care-giving, as well as teacher training for learning and development
 - striving towards a mandated core competency entry qualification for service providers working with children and families
 - reviewing and updating the current curricula of tertiary and TAFE early childhood courses and training, which supports an integrated care and education framework, effectively equipping students to delivery high quality integrated early years services
 - developing and implementing comprehensive approaches to service delivery that incorporates early intervention and parenting support as an integral component
 - more than the co-location of services
- Ensure that high quality integrated care and education children's services:
 - are equally accessible to all parents, to ensure every child has the opportunity and entitlement to receive high quality learning experiences from birth, within and outside the home
 - provide accessible parenting education and support
 - adhere to a universal framework for care and education
- Consider parental support all-inclusive and be available and accessible to all parents, with specific consideration given to the needs of:
 - working parents (e.g. full-time, part-time, casual, on-call, shift)
 - disadvantaged or marginalised families and those in remote/rural areas
 - stay-home parents who seek/require occasional children's services
- Dedicate government funds and time to develop and implement an integrated care and education framework for children's services.

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A multi-disciplinary team from the Centre for Community Child Health produce these Policy Briefs.

An advisory group of national and international experts in children's policy and service delivery provides advice and peer review.

References

A full list of references and further reading used in the development of this Policy Brief is available from:

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Centre for Community Child Health
The Royal Children's Hospital
Flemington Road
PARKVILLE 3052
Victoria Australia

Tel: +61 3 9345 5137
Email: email.policy@rch.org.au
Web: www.rch.org.au/ccch