

PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into adequacy of services to meet the developmental needs of Western Australian children

**Submission prepared by Early Childhood Australia (Western Australian Branch) Inc.
26 February 2009**

Early Childhood Australia is a peak, national, non-government, non-profit organisation with branches in each state and territory. Its purpose is to advocate for quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children from birth to eight years. As a strategy to achieve this outcome, ECA actively seeks partnerships with government and non-government agencies which have an interest in children's well being.

Name of Committee: Community and Development Justice Standing Committee

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Organisation: Early Childhood Australia (Western Australian Branch) Inc

Position held in organisation: Secretary

Preparedness to appear before the committee: Representatives of Early Childhood Australia (Western Australian Branch) Inc would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee

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Early Childhood Australia, Western Australian Branch Inc., is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry. This is a matter of considerable interest to our membership in Western Australia. ECAWA is comprised of over 200 individual and organisational members from across the State including professionals working in a diverse range of early childhood arenas including health, child care and early learning. An overview of ECAWA membership is attached for the Committee's information.

(a) whether existing government programs are adequately addressing the social and cognitive developmental needs of children, with particular reference to prenatal to 3 years

1a) Benefits of investment in the early years of life

In 2009 there can be little doubt about the benefits of investing in the early years of children's lives from the evidence based research collected to date. Over the last decade multi-disciplinary research findings demonstrate that such investment results in children's improved social and academic outcomes and increased future active citizenship and employment options.

Dr Frazer Mustard (2007)¹ contributed two chapters to a major World Bank publication on early childhood development where he concluded:

The quality of a population hinges on the development of its children – which underpins broader human development and overall economic growth and progress. The global workplace favours individuals who have an intellectual flexibility, problem-solving skills, emotional resilience, and capacity to work with others in a continually changing competitive economic environment. The need to maximise human potential has never been greater

A recent media release by the Minister for Education² referred to *Early intervention to improve literacy and numeracy levels* and focused on the assessment of Year One students and related resources. The intent of this project is to identify students requiring remedial intervention. If quality early childhood programs were in place for 0 – 3 year old children and their families this remediation would not be necessary. Intervention that is initiated in Year 1 is often too late and needs to target children at a much younger age.

How much better it would be to be proactive and support high quality appropriate early learning and care environments in the home, playgroups and child care before children get into the school system. Children learn from the moment they are born and there is considerable evidence available about the environments which nurture and foster children's early learning. In fact, a child's development is influenced even before birth by the mother's, and perhaps father's, health and pregnancy experiences. It is an inappropriate concept to assess children in Year 1 and determine they have failed school before they have even begun.

Families should be supported to provide the best possible start in life for their children. This should include a sound parenting package that allows both parents to be involved in their child's early development. Parents should have a suite of programs and services available to them in order to make the most appropriate choices for their family regarding their very young child's care and learning. These programs should be universally available irrespective of a family's circumstances or

¹ Mustard, Frazer in Mary Eming Young (ED) *Early child development from measurement to action: A priority for growth and equity*, The World Bank, Washington 2007. (as quoted in Alliance Newsletter Feb 2008 – Australia Research Alliance for Children and Youth)

² Minister for Education. Media Release: Early intervention to improve literacy and numeracy. WA government 2 February 2009.

location and include ante/ post natal support, child health, nutrition, and mental health, bi-lingual and parenting support.

Recent data³ that indicates that Western Australian students are below the national average in early literacy and numeracy measurement reinforces the need for a reassessment of early childhood programs in this state with a focus on children before they enter the school system.

2a) Child care

The benefits of high quality care is hugely beneficial to all children but even more so for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The high proportion of very young children in child care should focus the attention of policy makers and others on the need to ensure these environments are of the highest quality given what is now known about the possible detrimental impact of poor quality care during the early years of a child's life.

The majority of Western Australia (73%) children attending long day care centres are 3 years of age or younger⁴:

- 4% are under one year of age;
- 17% are one year olds;
- 25% are 2 year olds; and
- 27% are 3 year olds.

The numbers drop markedly once the children turn 4 (14%) and 5 (5%) years of age most likely due to the mainstream kindergarten provision in Western Australia for children from the age of 3 years and 7 months. The pattern of kindergarten provision presents its own set of problems for working parents as discussed below.

The system of Australian child care requires an urgent public policy response in which the well being of children is central. The current crisis and collapse of corporate child care providers and, in particular, the collapse of ABC Learning highlights a fundamental flaw in the Australian system of child care provision – a flaw which permits profit taking to become the key objective and not the best interests of children's development, early learning and care.

Australian taxpayers are funding shareholders at the expense of adequate investment in early learning and care and parental leave. Children become commodities in this equation. The focus should be on the children and not on the money. The provision of high quality early learning and care is an essential service for children and families and to the economic future of the State and country. It is far too important to be left to the whim of market forces.

The distress and disruption to children and their families as a result of the ABC collapse is inexcusable in contemporary Australia. The stability and continuity of learning and care is critical and the negative impact of having to move children to a new centre with different carers and children cannot be underestimated.

It is not a satisfactory policy response from the Western Australian government to repeatedly argue that child care is the Commonwealth's responsibility – the children who are affected are Western Australian children. This State's fragmented approach to the COAG negotiations with responsibility shared between the Department of Education and the Department for Communities is likely to result in further fragmented service provision. There are no cohesive governance structures in place to optimise the outcomes for Western Australian children and their families.

³ Western Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People, 20 January, 2009

⁴ 2006 Australian Government Census of Child Care Services

3a) Negative impact of poor quality child care

Early learning and care has not been given sufficient priority by government agencies in Western Australia. The failure of corporate child care in Australia highlights the disruption that can be caused to parents, children and employers when child care arrangements collapse or are put at risk. If inadequate or no child care is available, parents cannot work and are unable to meet their financial commitments. Parental leave should be provided to alleviate the financial stress on families with young babies to enable parents to choose to be their infant's primary carers. There is also a flow on impact to employers through staff turnover, loss of highly trained staff and general stress in the workplace.

Most importantly, the negative impact of disrupting the child care arrangements of very young children cannot be underestimated. The close relationship between child care staff, parents and young children is an essential prerequisite to the children's stability and wellbeing so when a centre closes and children have to be moved elsewhere there can be devastating consequences for children and their families. The State Government's provision of licensing exemptions on staffing, whilst allowing services to remain open, can have the effect of reinforcing lower quality in these services and further increasing the instability of care for children. Dual approaches to ensuring services are available whilst supporting services to deal with the underlying human resources issues is required.

Child care centres under financial stress are unable to adequately care for children and experience high staff turnover, inadequate nutrition, poor equipment and a generally very stressful environment for children. High quality child care has positive outcomes for children but there are longstanding detrimental consequences of poor quality child care on children's development⁵. In a child care setting it is essential for the staff to develop trusting relationships with the children while protecting the primary relationships with parents. This strong attachment between the children and staff functions to improve developmental outcomes and consistency of care is essential in building secure relationships. Conversely, in centres with a very high staff turnover this is not possible and there will be a negative impact on the children.

Poor quality child care affects all children, but it has an especially negative effect on children from vulnerable families and areas. This includes families from low economic backgrounds or remote communities, Indigenous families or families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

One Western Australian study conducted in 2008 (Targowska, 2009⁶) found that there is lack of adequate child care bilingual inclusion support. Early learning and care services and some Inclusion Support Agencies (ISA) reported their concerns in relation to the application process for bilingual support and the negative impact the current bilingual support model has on children and their families. Children's and parental emotional distress, unequal access to service provision, social isolation and children's behavioural problems were reported.

4a) The interface of kindergarten provision and child care in Western Australia

An example of the negative impact of the fragmentation of responsibilities is in relation to children of kindergarten age. These children, who are as young as 3 years 7 months, are subjected to a myriad of arrangements including:

- some attend child care and kindergarten and are transported to and from kindergarten on school sites either by the child care service, parents, grandparents, neighbours or other arrangements;

⁵ Hutchins, Teresa. *Babies need more than Minding*, AECA 1995, pp2

⁶ Targowska, A. (2009, February). The focus of Parent-Child Centres: Helping to create social capital in local communities. Paper presented at the 2009 NIFTeY/CCCH Conference, Melbourne, Australia.

- some attend only child care and do not attend a school based kindergarten. As there are no common standards across child care and kindergarten, and in some low quality child care services there is lack of appropriately trained staff to provide developmentally appropriate play based curriculum and ensure positive interactions, children who attend such services could potentially be disadvantaged on commencement of pre-primary, and
- some attend kindergarten on school sites and are transported to before and after school care services primarily concerned with the care of older primary school children.

The trend of multiple child care arrangements was first identified as a major issue in New South Wales⁷ in 2004. This was labeled “Patchwork Child Care”. Research identified the range of multiple arrangements was from one to eight different forms of care in a week including a finding that 75% of two year olds and 64% of one year olds used more than two types of care in a week.

Families reported stresses arising from pressures of combining work and family responsibilities. Anecdotal information indicates the situation in Western Australia is similar or worse given the pattern of kindergarten provision in this state. In Western Australia only 14% children⁸ in long day care centres are 4 years of age whereas the Australian average is 22% and in Western Australia 43% of long day care centres transport children to kindergarten programs whereas the Australian average is 14%. This patchwork arrangement of care for children as young as 3 years 7 months is not conducive to positive outcomes for very young children. It is more beneficial for children to remain in one stable and secure setting with developmentally appropriate early learning and care programs.

*Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*⁹ highlights the importance of transitions for young children and, in particular, the transition between child care and school based early childhood education programs. The smooth transition is enhanced by implementing strategies to ensure children moving from child care or informal kindergarten programs to school based early childhood education programs are not disadvantaged.

One strategy to achieve this is to have a common set of outcomes to be achieved in all early childhood and care environments. In this context, the proposed *National Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) would be cognizant of the long hours some children spend in child care environments and the related nurturing and care elements of the program. But it is currently unclear if this will apply to early childhood education programs in the school sector in Western Australia as the National Curriculum being developed concurrently starts from Kindergarten to year 12.

The current Commonwealth initiatives in early childhood education and care reform through the Council of Australian Governments Council (COAG) present considerable opportunities to improve the current system of provision for children in their early years. The COAG process is an opportunity for reform which includes the creation of frameworks, standards and ratings to all settings in which there are children from birth to 5 years.

Given that some children in kindergarten in Western Australia are as young as 3 years 7 months it is important that the EYLF should also apply to them. It would be inequitable if the proposed reforms were to apply to all children except when they are in a kindergarten program in Western Australian schools.

⁷ Wangman, Professor June, *Patchwork Child Care*: Government of New South Wales, Department for Community Services, Office of Childcare, November 2004.

⁸ *2006 Australian Government Census of Child Care Services*

⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, September 2006

There is an opportunity to reform the Western Australian system and overcome the fragmentation of provision but it is likely to be an opportunity lost due to Ministerial and bureaucratic wrangling over which agency is responsible for each piece of the puzzle. Having different government departments overseeing the administration of programs for young children results in a fragmented approach and quality provision is not achieved in either setting. There needs to be a holistic agenda for children with everyone singing from the same song sheet resulting in a coherent and seamless interface across 0 – 3 year old programs. The lack of a broadly based state vision and plan for the early years makes a coherent approach across government and non-government impossible.

5a) Alternative options and models for provision of child care

ECAWA recently provided the following comments to the Senate Inquiry into Child Care in Australia and believes it is pertinent to reiterate them in the context of this Western Australian Inquiry and this term of reference.

- The provision of services for children below school age should mirror the provision of services for children of school age with the setting up of an Early Childhood Development system that links to the schooling system. This will ensure the taxpayer dollars go directly to supporting the children and not shareholders.
- There are a diverse range of choices for parents to consider when considering a school for their children including public or private (independent) and it should be the same for children from 0 – 8 years.
- Although there is no place for corporate child care providers, there is a role for private operators of early learning and care programs either by the not-for-profit community sector or small private operators. Parents should have a choice about which type of child care is the most appropriate for their children and family circumstances.
- There is a history of community provision of early childhood services in Australia and this should be fostered and supported. Unfortunately this area of provision has been neglected by government in recent years but could be regenerated as a response to the current crisis.
- The deliberation about models of provision is underpinned by unanswered questions about levels of funding, status of staff in the child care arena and the qualifications and training of staff. There is no dispute about the need to have highly qualified staff but at no point has the key question of “who pays?” been addressed.
- A shift in thinking is required with the provision of services for the early learning and care to be continuous provision from birth upwards and be the responsibility of government. This does not mean government has to directly operate services but provide national leadership and funding. Similar to the school situation, parents would continue to have a right of choice and related payment of fees.
- Early childhood learning and care provided in child care services and schools are inseparable and there needs to be a more cohesive system from birth upwards and through school. This should be supported by parental leave provisions and an array of family support mechanisms.
- The Rudd government has recognised some of the key elements of such a system but the implementation is problematic due to the complexity of federal state relations and the cross portfolio responsibilities at a state and federal level.
- A review of the current funding arrangements is the first step in the way forward. This would include all government payments to parents and subsidises to operators, capital and recurrent. It should also include various bail out payments which have been made to ABC Learning receivers. This will allow for greater analysis of funding allocations and enable feasibility studies to be conducted into new models and possible reallocation of pooled funding.

6a) Collaboration

In March 2008, ECAWA submitted a paper to the Western Australian Select Committee Inquiry into Collaborative Approaches in Government and has re-submitted the paper to this new Inquiry under separate cover. ECAWA emphasises the concerns expressed in that paper as twelve months down the track little has changed in Western Australia.

Hertzman (2002)¹⁰ highlighted the need for a more collaborative approach when he drew on the Canadian experience in putting a case for developing an *Early Child Development Strategy* for Australia. He argued that knowledge about the developing brain means that improving child development means improving the environments in which children grow up, live and learn. As health, well-being and competence share common determinants there is considerable scope to apply research findings. It also means the objectives of a wide range of government and non government agencies can be met by acting in concert.

Similarly, the OECD¹¹ also highlighted the importance of coordinated policy frameworks at the centralised level due to the complexity and breadth of early childhood policy issues. Early childhood policy is not only concerned with child development and child poverty but also with workforce participation, social wellbeing, early education and child care. A strong argument is put for developing a systematic approach to policy development within a common policy framework, setting consistent goals across the system and with clearly defined responsibilities at all levels of government.

The separation of the Department for Community Development into two new Departments (Child Protection and Communities) was a welcome move but ECAWA does not perceive this has contributed to any further integration between early childhood education and child care. On the other hand, other Australian jurisdictions have developed comprehensive Early Years Plans and restructured Government agencies to facilitate implementation through an integrated and collaborative approach. These jurisdictions are better placed to respond to COAG initiatives than Western Australia.

The Premier recently announced a change of portfolio responsibility with the Minister for Education taking over responsibility for Early Childhood Development. It remains unclear what this means as the expertise and experience in the provision of early childhood services remains with the Department for Communities.

An appropriate structure would be the establishment of an overarching Office of Child Development which encompasses the broad range of early childhood responsibilities including child care and early childhood education. A model similar to those which have been established in Victoria and Queensland is suggested. In Western Australia an Office of Early Childhood Development could be created which sits within the Education portfolio under the responsibility of a Director General for Early Childhood reporting directly to the Minister for Education. The Western Australian Commissioner for Children and Youth's proposed model is worthy of consideration.

¹⁰ Hertzman, Clyde: *An Early Child Development Strategy for Australia? Lessons from Canada*. Commission for Children & Young People, Queensland Government 2002, pp3.

¹¹ OECD *ibid* pp47

(b) how to appropriately identify developmentally vulnerable children, and (f) what is the most appropriate measure of program outcomes

ECAWA regards these two Terms of Reference as interrelated and presents the following comments in this regard.

Neurobiological research demonstrates the impact of prolonged stress on children's developmental outcomes. Developmental vulnerability is therefore a complex issue which links to a variety of micro systems in which children directly participate. Being in group care can contribute to considerable amount of stress experienced by children. However, research by Gunnar¹² and colleagues (2001) demonstrates that high quality centres for infants and toddlers contribute to the reduction of stress levels. Therefore, there is a need to identify centres of low quality, where children are emotionally distressed due to the lack of positive interactions and programs which are not stimulating and play based. It is of prime importance to put in place strategies to prevent such centres from operating to reduce the risk of children's negative developmental outcomes.

Providing adequate support to disadvantaged families by providing them with opportunities to develop networks of support within their local communities and linking them to available resources is also necessary to prevent developmental disadvantage for children. This can be done through developing service models that allow for co-location of services needed in each individual community. Early learning and care, child health and parenting services would play an important role in identifying children's developmental vulnerability and actively assist families in developing their social capital.

Young children develop at their own pace and formal testing of children between 0 – 3 years is developmentally inappropriate. Testing shows what has or has not been achieved, whereas the focus should be on prevention of negative outcomes by creating high quality environments that promote positive development. This is a child focused environment which is stimulating and nurturing and consists of facilitated play experiences. Learning opportunities are created for each child based on his/her unique interests, needs and context. The quality of children's interactions with adults and the environment plays an important part in the quality of their learning. The focus on the whole child, where limitations in ability are identified and targeted interventions at all levels explores, fosters social inclusion for all children and their families.

Investment in early childhood education, and care and parent/family support must be embedded in cultural and societal beliefs about young children where children are seen as part of a family, community and society. Children must be understood as a community of intuitive learners with both nurturing and educational needs and rights.

Having university qualified early childhood professionals in leadership positions and ongoing assessment through observations by appropriately qualified early childhood professionals will identify vulnerable children. Early childhood professionals should have a comprehensive knowledge of child development and the ability to assess the qualitative dimensions of children's learning environments. They must be able to conduct observations as a tool for assessment and have a good understanding of working with communities and families. The child grows and learns within a family and community and it is important that early childhood professionals understand the importance of developing relationships and supporting families. The co-location of local services is important as it supports families' access to services close to home, particularly specialist services such as child and maternal health, occupational therapists or speech therapists. Such integrated services can also provide

¹² Gunnar & White, (2001) Salivary cortisol measures in infant and child assessment. In L.Singer & P. Zeskind (Eds.), *Biobehavioural assessment of the infant*. pp. 167-1890. New York: Guilford Press.

families with opportunities to develop personal network of support through, for example, easy access to playgroups, child health and other services which support healthy family systems.

(c) which government agency or agencies should have coordinating and resourcing responsibility for the identification and delivery of assistance to 0-3 year old children

This is discussed in (2a) and (6a) above. This will be achieved by the establishment of an Office of Early Childhood Development which brings together the core functions of early childhood in the Departments of Communities, Education, Health and Disabilities. As the Minister for Education holds portfolio responsibility for Early Childhood Development this would sit under that portfolio area in a separate Office with line responsibility to Director General for Early Childhood Development who reports to the Minister for Education.

(d) what is the best model to ensure interagency and intergovernmental integration of developmental programs delivered to 0-3 year old children

This is discussed in (a) and (c) above. The Western Australia Commissioner for Children and Young People¹³ outlines this very well. She correctly highlights that “it is impossible for communities and families to break up the everyday challenges they face to fit neatly into government structures”. What is needed is a Western Australian Office of Early Childhood “with responsibility to develop, implement and report on a plan for improving services to our youngest citizens”....and, this means “developing new ways of thinking and creating new methods of funding that encourage or demand coordinated services”.

(e) how to prioritize the resources available for meeting the needs identified

Every effort should be made to improve the overall quality of young children’s lives and environments. Mainstream collaborative and integrated services will result in improvements across the population of young children and within that context vulnerable children will be supported with additional services as required.

(f) what is the most appropriate measure of program outcomes

This is addressed in conjunction with (b) above.

(g) any other related matter deemed relevant by the Committee

There is an urgent need to have an Early Years Plan or Early Years Strategy for Western Australia. In Victoria the *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* forms the basis for strategic planning. This provides a framework for macro public policy development in relation to Commonwealth State negotiations; local government authorities; government and non government agencies; universities and training bodies; parents and communities. All the other jurisdictions have similar plans in place but in Western Australia there is a policy vacuum.

An articulated Western Australian vision for the early years and a plan for future years, together with the creation of a collaborative Office of Early Childhood Development, will provide the foundation for the people of Western Australia to build the important foundation of the early years of life.

¹³ Commissioner for Children and Young People, Western Australia. Increased investment in children critically overdue. January 2009.

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ATTACHMENT 1

ECA (WA BRANCH) - MEMBERSHIP OVERVIEW

The Western Australian Branch currently has about 200 individual and 45 organisational members. The list below provides an overview of the broadly based membership. Members come from across WA and represent a very broad cross section of early childhood interests. Most of the peak agencies with an interest in early childhood are members.

Education and training sectors

- Catholic Education Office
- Individual Catholic primary schools
- Individual state and non-government primary schools
- Presbyterian Ladies College
- Various TAFE colleges (metro and country eg Pilbara)
- Universities
- Academics (ECU, Curtin, Murdoch)
- Australian Montessori Society
- DET District Education Offices
- Association of Independent Schools

Child care and family support services

- Family Day Care Schemes of Western Australia Association
- Playgroup WA
- Individual private and community-based child care centres
- Family centres
- Carewest (Association of community based child care)
- Family Day Care Schemes (metro and country)
- Wanslea Family Services
- Ngala
- YMCA
- YMCA Goldfields
- Bright Futures
- Resource Unit for Children with Special Needs (RUCSN)
- Meerilinga Young Children's Foundation
- Rural Children's Support Network
- Communicare
- The Gowrie
- Clan WA

Other

- Local government authorities
- Individual members from all over WA including remote and rural eg Mulga Downs Station and Tom Price
- Individual members from a range of interdisciplinary areas in health, education, child care and social work
- ALHMU
- Pilbara Development Commission

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