

**Community Development and Justice  
Standing Committee**

**Inquiry into the Adequacy of Services to  
Meet the Developmental Needs of  
Western Australia's Children**

**Submitted by  
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## INTRODUCTION TO EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION AUSTRALIA

Early Childhood Intervention Australia (WA) is the Western Australian chapter of the peak national body, Early Childhood Intervention Australia. Since 1992 ECIA (WA) has provided a local forum for the promotion of early childhood intervention as an essential service and is well placed to contribute, on behalf of children with developmental delay and disability, their families and service providers, to the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee's inquiry into the adequacy of services to meet the developmental needs of young children in WA.

Early childhood intervention has evolved since the latter half of last century and is widely recognised as a key strategy for good developmental outcomes of children and support for their families.

Early childhood intervention consists of multi and interdisciplinary services provided to children from birth to school age to promote child health and well being, enhance emerging competencies, minimise developmental delays, remediate existing or emerging disabilities, prevent functional deterioration, and promote adaptive parenting and overall family functioning.<sup>1</sup>

Early childhood intervention includes information, assessment, therapy, counselling, health services, education, respite care, equipment and inclusion support to participate in mainstream programs. Services are delivered by a wide range of professionals such as occupational therapists, physiotherapists, paediatricians, psychologists, social workers, speech pathologists, child health nurses, teachers, inclusion workers, educational assistants and behavioural therapists in a variety of settings such as homes, clinics, family and community centres, child care centres and preschools.

ECIA recognises that parents and families are primary to their child's wellbeing and development.

Early Childhood Intervention Australia supports up to date evidenced based approaches to intervention.

- Services are family centred, based on a partnership between parents and professionals. Service delivery recognises family functioning with a wider social context and the importance of a family network of social support
- Interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary teamwork to provide an integrated program for families with a key worker for easier contact;

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<sup>1</sup> Meisels, S and Shonkoff, J Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention Cambridge Press

- Inclusion in mainstream settings both as a right and as an evidenced based major intervention strategy. Inclusion necessitates additional support for universal service providers.
- The best outcomes are achieved when programs work with and have goals for parents, community services as well as children.

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

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

### **Delay in access to services**

*Much of the experience of childhood disability is characterised by waiting - waiting to see how an impairment manifests, waiting for test results, waiting for vacancies to become available. The primary concern of parents ... was that their child is missing the window of opportunity....<sup>2</sup>*

Too few children receive services in their first three years. Service access to specialist disability early childhood intervention requires evidence that a child meets eligibility criteria. Children with profound disability are more likely be referred early frequently from Princess Margaret Hospital. Other children with significant but less obvious developmental problems may be overlooked until they fail in early education. The opportunity of support for positive development in the early years has been lost.

### **Complexity of referral pathway**

The pathway from when parent first raise their concerns or are informed possible developmental problems to developmental assessment, tests, diagnosis and determination of eligibility for a services is complex, takes time, may involve multiple agencies and professions. There may be bottlenecks and waiting lists and frequently there is no intervention while the child is on this path. Some children may not complete this pathway until too late for effective early intervention.

### **Fragmentation of Services**

Special services for young children in WA are provided by multiple authorities, State and Commonwealth government departments, non-government agencies and private practitioners.

Departments have separate objectives, priorities and access criteria which results in confusion and stress for families at a most difficult time. There are too many professionals, too many visits, too many retellings of the child's history. Families who are well organised and supported can find their way to the services of their choice. Some families give up. Those who are unlikely to access timely services are often the most disadvantaged.

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<sup>2</sup> *Supporting families who have a child with a disability* 2002 University of NSW Social Policy Research Centre

Separate specialist services cannot meet all the needs of eligible children and families but the family's involvement with one service may preclude access to others.

Separation of specialist services and universal programs does not assist universal service providers to develop their capacity to recognise and respond to early problems.

### **Location and Diversity**

Western Australia including Perth is a dispersed community. Travel to a central clinic for assessment or intervention can be difficult and expensive for families without transport, again the most disadvantaged families.

Service in rural and remote areas are variable and highly dependent on the individual attitude, knowledge and relevant skills of professionals who serve a broad client group. There is a high staff turnover in the country and gaps in services because positions are unfilled.

Children from indigenous families may not be involved with local universal services unless families have gained confidence that the program is culturally welcoming. They are even less likely to participate in separate specialist programs where they may be the only family from their community.

For marginalised families and families who have been through trauma it can take time to build the trust needed for parents to accept referrals to new service. If intervention is dependent on enrolment in a separate specialist service children may wait too long.

### **Recommendations:**

Key strategies to delivering effective services to promote the development of children capacities and effective parenting include:

- Ready access for families of young children prior to the age of Kindergarten; to universal services such as child health centre programs, parenting activities, parent help centres, playgroups, child care; early learning programs;
- Assessment services that where possible go to children's local program programs rather than require families to attend central clinics;

- Seamless, non stigmatising initial assessment of need for intervention services on a functional rather than diagnostic basis. Diagnosis can come at the next step and is important in deciding what strategies to use but not that a child and family needs assistance.
- Better integration of specialist with universal programs to ensure children's needs can be more quickly identified and that universal services are increasingly able to provide early support to children and families with a diverse range of needs.
- Programs which address the needs of both families and children

**(B) how to appropriately identify developmentally vulnerable children;**

Parents and carers may not

- be aware of the importance of the early years for good outcomes across the life span
- know what to expect of their child in relation to achieving developmental milestones
- know whether they should be concerned or accept reassurance from family and friends,
- be aware that there are steps they can take to encourage their child's development
- know from whom and from where they can seek advice and assistance and what costs and time are involved.

Developmental problems may not always be apparent at a single early screen. Subtle signs may be overlooked and parent concerns met with reassurance. Some children do catch up but others continue to struggle without parents knowing that they can make a difference and how to encourage development.

**Recommendation**

- Multiple opportunities are required for early identification of children developmental concerns such as on going child health centre follow up from first year of life, developmental screening at the same time as immunisation, child health nurse visits to child care and play groups.
- Information about child development in locations that young families visit including information for fathers who are often out of the information and assessment loop.
- Standardised assessments are recommended for better rate of accurate identification of children with developmental or mental health problems.

**(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;**

*When working with children it is their whole life and circumstances that require attention, not just isolated issues or problems<sup>3</sup>*

There are a vast number of services involved with children and their families funded by government, both Commonwealth and state, private enterprise, charitable donation and self funded by families themselves.

There is no single department whose mandate covers the full scope of children and families lives. The different jurisdictions of Western Australian government departments provide differently focused services for young children and their families and each department has its own planning processes and funding priorities. There remains, however, shared roles and is considerable overlap.

Families and services providers alike are well aware of and regret the silo nature of service provision and there have been frequent calls for better integration of services. There are examples of good government developments which have brought together the relevant services such as maternal and child health, education, care, community services and specialist early intervention. Well known programs are Sure Start from the United Kingdom and in Australia the recent initiative of the Victorian government in first creating an Office for Children, now within the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

### **Recommendations**

The ECIA supports the development of an overarching strategy for Western Australian children as proposed by NIFTeY and the Western Australian Children's Commissioner proposal for an Office of Children for Western Australia and a comprehensive Early Childhood Plan.

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<sup>3</sup> A Strategy for Western Australian Children 2003 prepared by NIFTeY (National Investment for the Early Years)



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

**Model principles**

Children with developmental delay and disability have access to the same services in the same way as more typically developing children with recognition that adaptations and additional resourcing will be required.

Policy and program development in children's services include **all** children and build in, from the earliest planning stages, provision for children who will have additional needs. Universal design is much more efficient than retro fitting for special groups at a later stages.

Service development for children with special needs to build on the common needs of all children and families for community and social networks and parenting and child rearing advice and information, before developing separate services for particular groups.

Service development needs to involve early consultation and mapping of aligned services and agencies to ensure efficient use of resources and identify opportunities for collaboration and service complementarity.

Agency collaboration requires as well as formal agreements, positive attitudes and the skills and commitment to work collaboratively at all levels, from senior management to local service delivery. Collaboration will save time for workers and families and provide a better outcome but the process also requires endorsement resourcing and monitoring.

**(E) how to best prioritise the resources available for meeting the needs identified;**

There are many services for children in Western Australia, some based on research findings, others based on service providers' experience of the needs of their client group. Many services are pilots or limited in reach to a single location.

A comprehensive early childhood plan for Western Australia that specifies the range of service needed and maps current availability would also identify present inequities and gaps.

**Recommendation**

Clear funding guidelines are needed to ensure that resources are directed to:

- extend access across Western Australia to effective programs that are currently provided but limited to one location or target group,
- programs with strong research based evidence of positive outcomes for children and families;
- families less able to make use of information, advice and services currently provided; and
- build family and community supports that buttresses families at time of stress.
- achieve a balance between innovation and ensuring all children in WA have access to services already available to some.

**Priority for ECIA**

Not much can be achieved unless there is an early access to the needed services and support. A priority for the ECIA is a significant improvement and streamlining of the path to early intervention and ensuring service places are available or promptly made available for all eligible children.

**(F) what is the most appropriate measure of program outcomes;**

**1 National Outcome Statement for Early Childhood Intervention**

Before outcomes can be measured there needs to be agreement as to the desired outcomes for children, families and communities.

A draft set of outcomes for early childhood intervention services has been developed in Victoria. It is based on current outcome literature, evidence of best practice and involved wide community consultation.

In October 2008 Early Childhood Intervention Australia in conjunction with representatives from Commonwealth, State and Territory governments agreed to support the adoption of a National Outcome Statement for Early Childhood Intervention Providers. It was proposed that the Victorian draft should be the basis of a nationwide consultation.

ECIA WA supports this proposal but recognises that within a national approach different states will have different challenges and priorities.

**2. Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) ,**

The AEDI is now an Australian wide population measure. Data is collected about all children in their Pre-primary year including children with special or additional needs. It a measure of both the child's development and the capacity of their community to support children and families in the early years.

The ways in which AEDI data could best be used to influence service priorities and resourcing in Western Australia for children with special needs have not yet been identified. The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research holds the AEDI expertise which makes the possibility of exploration of the use of AEDI to shape future services an exciting prospect.

**Recommendations**

1. That Western Australia consult broadly with consumers and universal and specialist services with a view to endorsing and adopting a National Outcome Statement for Early Childhood Intervention Providers.
2. Exploration of the use of AEDI data to improve the focus and priority funding for targeted groups.