

Discussion paper

Early childhood

Introduction

Children are the key to Australia's future. According to the 2006 Census of Population and Housing, there were around 4 million children aged 0 – 14 years and 2.9 million young people aged 15 – 24 years living in Australia.

Couples with children are still the most common family type, but their proportion has decreased over the decade 1996 to 2006 from 50% of families to 46%. At the same time, the number of one-parent families increased from 649,000 in 1996 to 800,000 in 2006¹.

Most of Australia's children are doing well, living healthy, happy lives, full of opportunity. However, others are missing out. One-parent families generally have fewer financial resources available to them and are likely to experience poorer outcomes².

There are children at particular disadvantage and risk. These include children and young people in the child protection system, or in the juvenile justice system and children who are homeless³. Outcomes for Indigenous children are woeful.

Critical phases in children's lives

There are a number of phases in a child's life, marked by significant transition points when interventions can make a profound difference to their future, particularly in the early years:

- The first nine months – conception to birth, when a mother's physical and mental health, nutrition and other behaviours have a profound effect on the developing foetus
- Birth to three years, when a child's early home environment, care and learning experiences are crucial in their cognitive and social development, setting the path for not just the remainder of childhood, but for a person's health, workforce participation and relationship experiences over a lifetime
- The preschool years (ages 3 to 5), when children's brains and their cognitive and non-cognitive wiring are still undergoing rapid development and like the first three years have a profound effect on a person's future life
- The primary school years (ages 5 or 6 through to 11), when children profit – or not – from their early experiences and continue to develop their learning, social and relationship patterns – both positive and negative

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008), *Year Book Australia, 2008*

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007), *Australia's welfare 2007*

³ AIHW, *ibid*

- The early secondary school years (ages 11 or 12 through to 15) and puberty, when even previously engaged children can begin to lose their attachment to home, school and learning, depending on a range of factors including their learning and social experiences in school, peer group influence and family dynamics
- The transition from school to further study or work, when the trends set in the very early years come to fruition, and early advantages continue to create opportunities for positive experiences and early disadvantages are very difficult and very costly to overcome.

Vulnerability

Most Australian children enjoy healthy, happy childhoods and get to take part in play, school and social activities. Some children though are vulnerable to risk throughout their childhood and do not get to access the opportunities available to others. These children include:

- Those children conceived and born into disadvantaged families, whose rates of mortality, low birth weight and childhood illnesses are higher than those in advantaged families⁴ and who miss out on activities and opportunities that other children take for granted, such as participating in school excursions, sporting and other leisure activities
- Indigenous children, for whom the infant mortality rate is twice that of the total population and the rate of low birth weight is also twice that of non-Indigenous babies. Indigenous children's disadvantage pervades their school years, where their outcomes and retention rate are well below their non-Indigenous peers⁵
- Children in out of home care, who experience disrupted, fragmented childhoods and whose transition to adulthood is marked by the end of formal care arrangements and often moving out of 'home', losing a supportive parental influence, much earlier than their peers.

Changing children's life chances

There is now a wealth of literature evidencing the impact of early childhood experiences on the development and wellbeing of children and the difference that positive early interventions can make to children's experiences and opportunities throughout life⁶. High quality early childhood programs can produce far-reaching academic and social benefits for all children and those who are vulnerable to risk of school failure seem to benefit the most. However, the most vulnerable do not participate in early childhood programs, or if they do, they attend the lowest quality programs⁷.

The outcomes from early childhood interventions are both immediate and long-term. The March 2008 evaluation report on Sure Start points to improvements in parenting

⁴ Scutella, R and Smyth, P (2005) *The Brotherhood's Social Barometer: Monitoring children's chances*

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Heckman, J (2006) *The Economics of Investing in Early Childhood*; (then) Department of Family and Community Services, *Stronger Families and Communities – Communities for Children* at

www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/sfsc-communities_for_children.htm

⁷ Elliott, A (2006) *Early Childhood Education: Pathways to quality and equity for all children*

behaviours⁸, and in three year olds' social development and increases in parents' uptake of available services. Heckman demonstrates that early interventions have lasting positive effects for individuals and for the community, with investments in early childhood reaping high returns⁹.

Federal government policies

The Rudd government has committed to policies and programs that have the potential to improve the life chances of all Australian children, including the most vulnerable. These policies and programs include:

- A social inclusion agenda that aims to ensure that all Australians are able to participate in economic, social and civic life
- A universal right to 15 hours a week of early learning for all 4 year olds, with \$450 million over five years being provided to ensure universal access
- Healthy Kids Check and the roll out of the Australian Early Development Index to detect and deal with problems that can limit a child's success at school
- An expansion of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) to 50 communities across Australia
- A commitment to close the infant mortality gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous babies; to halve the growing gap in literacy, numeracy and employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; and to have all Indigenous 4 year olds in remote communities engaged in early learning by the end of five years.

However, these policies and programs in isolation will not achieve the government's stated aims of giving all children a good start. Simply making opportunities available is not enough; for some families and children, a more targeted, interventionist approach is needed.

What needs to happen

There needs to be a 'joined-up' approach that includes complementary universal and targeted approaches. Australian and overseas research points to the need for and success of interventions that use universal access, albeit targeted to disadvantaged communities, as a screen or filter to identify families and children at risk¹⁰.

The Australian and state governments have a range of early intervention programs that are both universal and targeted in approach. Examples include Communities for children (Cwlth), Families First (NSW), Best Start (Vic), Pathways for Families (SA) and Family CARE (Qld). The common strengths of successful intervention programs are that they:

⁸ National Evaluation of Sure Start Research Team (2008) *The Impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on Three Year Olds and Their Families*

⁹ Heckman, op. cit.

¹⁰ See for example, McCain & Mustard (1999) *Reversing the real brain drain: Early years study*; Stanley, F 'The real brain drain – Why putting children first is so important for Australia' in *Action Packed* Vol. 8 – Issue 2, 2003; National Evaluation of Sure Start Research Team (2008), op. cit.

- are tailored to the circumstances in local communities, involving partnerships across sectors and community and parent input into their design and delivery
- target resources to areas of particular disadvantage and are not ‘quick fix’ solutions, but there for the long haul
- apply a strengths based approach that builds on the capacity and capabilities of both communities and parents, creating child friendly environments
- use universal, non-stigmatising services (such as maternal and child health and playgroups) to encourage all parents to participate in activities that could benefit their children
- identify and target assistance to at risk families and children
- invest in the early years, recognising the benefits that will accrue over time for children, their families and their communities¹¹
- are flexible and able to respond to unexpected opportunities and difficulties.

Anglicare Australia advocates the continuance and expansion of early intervention approaches to ensure that *all* Australian children have the opportunity to reach their full potential. It is important that Australian and state governments collaborate on early intervention strategies to provide a surer safety net for families and children at risk, ensuring that synergies are exploited to provide the best start for disadvantaged children.

However, without sustained monitoring of children’s progress and intervening with appropriate supports where necessary, early gains may be lost, especially in the teenage years. Peer group and other pressures, such as family breakdown, can lead children to disengage with school and engage in damaging and anti-social behaviours¹².

Child protection

If early intervention strategies are successful in turning disadvantaged lives around, the impact should be evident in a lesser involvement of the child protection system in children’s lives. The current story is grim.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare’s *Child Protection Australia 2006-07* reports that, from 2002 to 2007, the number of Australian children in out of home care increased by 51%, from 18,880 to 28,441. In the same period, children on care and protection orders increased by 43%, to 29,406.

The majority of children in out-of-home care were in foster care (50%) or living with relatives (44%), with only 4% of children living in residential care.

Child abuse substantiations increased from 55,921 cases in 2005-06 to 58,563 in 2006-07. Emotional abuse was the most common reason for substantiation in half the states and territories, with neglect or physical abuse being the most common reason in others.

¹¹ Information drawn from *Communities for children* information on FaHCSIA’s website

¹² Elliott, Op. cit.

Indigenous children are over-represented and were nearly five times as likely as other children to be the subject of a substantiated claim of child abuse; over six times as likely to be under a care and protection order; and more than seven times as likely to be in out-of-home care as other children.

What is also evident is that children enter care from increasingly complex family situations. Family homelessness, parental mental illness, alcohol and drug dependence and family violence are very significant factors.

The AIHW does caution that some of this increase is the result of changes in policy and practices by jurisdictions and in public awareness of, and preparedness to report suspected child abuse. Other contributing factors are a rise in the number of children requiring protection and the cumulative effect of children staying in the system longer.

The picture nationally is uneven, due primarily to the different policies and practices of each state or territory.

State authorities have been under increased scrutiny following the deaths of a number of children 'known to the authorities' over the 2007 calendar year.

The federal Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs is working with her state and territory counterparts to develop a national framework for the protection of children. The framework will aim to bring consistency to child protection policies and practices across Australia and identify ways the commonwealth can increase its role in the protection of children.

Strategy

Anglicare Australia will:

- lobby to reinforce to the Rudd government the need for a 'joined up' approach to early childhood strategies and the benefits of combining universal and targeted programs to 'capture' and respond to the needs of vulnerable children.
- seek Anglicare Australia members' views on whether preschool attendance should be made compulsory for all 4 year olds (while universal, if attendance is voluntary, vulnerable children who are the most likely to benefit are also those who are most likely not to attend).
- monitor the impacts of health checks and the roll out of the AEDI. Did children get access to the services and supports that were identified to help their chances?
- support the Rudd government's commitment to improve the life chances of Indigenous Australians and monitor progress and outcomes.
- monitor the implementation and outcomes of the Northern Territory Intervention.
- participate in the development of a national framework for child protection.