

Submission

**Productivity Commission Inquiry:
Childcare and Early Childhood
Learning**

February 2014



Parenting Research Centre
raising children well

About the Parenting Research Centre

Established in 1997, the Parenting Research Centre (PRC) is an Australian independent, non-profit research and development organisation with a focus on families and parenting. Our mission is to help parents raise happy healthy children. Our work is premised on strong scientific evidence that outcomes for children can be improved by effectively supporting families in their parenting role. We focus our efforts on supporting the work of governments, systems, organisations and practitioners to design and effectively implement evidence-informed policy, programs and practices in parenting and family support.

Our specialisations include:

- Undertaking research to inform a contemporary understandings of parenting and how best to support people in their parenting roles
- Synthesising, translating and applying evidence to improve policy, systems, service delivery and practice
- Designing and/or supporting the implementation of innovation in programs and practice in close collaboration with providers
- Supporting the alignment of service and governance structures to improve system design and service delivery.

The Raising Children Network is one of PRC's largest projects. Established in 2006, in partnership with Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health, the [Raising Children Network](#) is the complete Australian resource for parenting newborns to teens. It provides a comprehensive range of evidence-informed information on pregnancy, child health, learning, development and behaviour from pregnancy and infancy to the middle teens. In 2013 the Raising Children Network website received 5.1 million visits and 11.7 million page views. Also widely used by government and non-government child and family services, it is fast becoming an effective, universal information delivery system for Australian parents. Raising Children Network is primarily funded through the Department of Social Services Family Support Program.

In 2013 the PRC had an annual turnover of \$14.5 million with over 90% of income sourced from State and Federal government grants. We employ 70 staff and are involved in over 30 projects nationally. The PRC is an incorporated association and our Annual Reports can be viewed at <http://www.parentingrc.org.au/index.php/about-prc/annual-reports>

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Executive summary

This submission focuses on the Commission’s terms of reference relating to the potential of early childhood education and care services in optimising children’s early learning and development, and specifically, in improving outcomes for children vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes.

There is a significant body of evidence now pointing to the formative nature of the early years in children’s lifelong development and wellbeing, and the critical role played by high quality early childhood services in interrupting negative developmental trajectories. As we now know that parents are their children’s first and most important teachers, we argue that outcomes for children could be significantly improved by an early childhood sector that also extends a positive influence to the early home learning environment and engages and supports parents effectively. This is important as research has shown that it is the impact of the home learning environment and the quality of parent-child relationships that exert the strongest and most durable effects on child development.

We believe that early childhood services could be more effective in the provision of **parenting support**—activity that involves supporting the development of strong parent-child relationships and positive parent-child interaction—as well as **parent support**—activity that strengthens parental wellbeing, enhancing parental coping and reducing negative stress on family relationships.

In this submission we draw on the following PRC research:

- the Early Home Learning Study which investigates ways of improving early home learning environment through collaborations with early childhood services in Victoria (parenting support)
- the impact of poor quality jobs on parents mental health and child outcomes and the implications of these findings (parent support).

Our recommendations to the Inquiry focus on mechanisms to enhance both parenting and parent support.

Recommendations

1. The effectiveness of early childhood services in optimising the development of young children, especially children vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes, could be significantly enhanced by building capacity for parenting and parent support.
2. This would require investment in workforce capacity building, specifically in developing worker skills in engaging parents, holding constructive conversations with parents, and providing brief opportunistic support and information.
3. To increase the positive impact of services on the home learning environment, another important element in workforce development is ensuring that workers in early childhood education and care can competently and reliably demonstrate behaviours known to promote child development (such as those described in the PRC's Early Home Learning Study), and model and coach parents in using these behaviours at home. The Early Home Learning Study has demonstrated that it is possible to assist early childhood services to increase the impact they have on the home learning environment.
4. Early childhood services could effectively become 'parenting resource' services. This potential could be largely realised by the systematic embedding of online information supports, such as those provided by the Raising Children Network. In addition to the quality assurance and accuracy this would bring to the information shared with parents, the range of resources would substantially increase the proactive information strategy (i.e., health promotion) and reactive information's strategy (i.e., responding to parents' information needs).
5. Developments in workplace and employment policy need to keep pace with early childhood. Increasing workplace flexibility, decreasing workplace stress, supporting employers to have positive and constructive conversations with employees about issues related to the work-family interface, will benefit parents, with advantages flowing through to their children. In the meantime, access to affordable high quality childcare, especially when delivered with a high level of competence in parent engagement and strong service parent relationships, will mitigate some of the family stress that could have negative effects on child development and wellbeing.
6. The Inquiry consider the opportunity to access 'parent voices' on early childhood services through RCN parent forums.

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission Inquiry: *Childcare and Early Childhood Learning 2013*. We are responding to the call for submissions as an independent child and family research, development and implementation organisation.

In this submission the PRC focuses on the Commission's terms of reference, relating to the potential of early childhood education and care services in optimising children's early learning and development, and specifically, in improving outcomes for children vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes. We argue that parents are their children's first and most important teachers and that outcomes for children could be significantly improved by an early childhood sector that extends a positive influence to the early home learning environment and engages and supports parents effectively.

Early learning context

There is a significant body of evidence now pointing to the formative nature of the early years in children's lifelong development and wellbeing, and the critical role played by high quality early childhood services in interrupting negative developmental trajectories. We expect that the Commission will receive extensive representation in this regard, and so we will not review this material in detail, other than to say that our recommendations are grounded in strong evidence for the following propositions:

- Early experience shapes the architecture of the developing brain (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007) ultimately setting the foundation for societies' social and economic wellbeing throughout the life-course (Anderson et al., 2003; Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2007; Keating & Hertzman, 1999; Marmot et al., 2010; McCain & Mustard, 1999).
- The benefits of providing programs and support for early child development have been demonstrated in a number of reviews and experimental clinical trials (Love et al., 2005) – both broadly based education and care programs, and programs that focus on parenting (Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003; Landry, Smith, Swank, & Guttentag, 2008), with positive effects on children's cognitive and educational progress

and social and health outcomes (Anderson et al., 2003; E. Melhuish et al., 2004; E. Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2001; E. C. Melhuish et al., 2008).

- High quality early childhood education disproportionately benefits disadvantaged and vulnerable children (Sylva, Melhuish et al 2004) who would otherwise be at greater risk of poor health and developmental outcomes (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007; Davis et al, 2010; Jansen et al, 2013; Nicholson, Lucas, Berthelsen & Wake, 2012).
- Investment in early intervention initiatives has the potential to have significant long term public and societal benefits, due to greater academic and educational achievements; greater workforce participation (and therefore reduced welfare) and productivity, and reduced crime (Heckman, 2008; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003).

The home learning environment

To date, policy responses to improve early learning in Australia have largely focussed on improving the availability and quality of early childhood education and care services. Efforts to improve staff qualifications and the introduction of quality systems and practice frameworks have sought to enhance the learning environments provided by these services.

Whilst these are crucially important developments, research has consistently shown that the impact of the home environment and the quality of parent-child relationships exert the strongest and most durable effects on children’s development. These effects are independent of the type, length and quality of early childhood services. Indeed, the early years of life are critically important in determining children’s long-term development, and it is parents who—by virtue of the unique parent-child relationship—are children’s first and most enduring educators (McCain & Mustard, 1999; Shonkoff & Meissels, 2000).

A home environment that is stimulating and rich in language promotes children’s socio-emotional and communication skills and helps to prepare them for later formal education (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). Children whose early home environments are lacking such stimulation have elevated risks for poorer outcomes (B. Hart & Risley, 1995; Pungello, Iruka, Dotterer, Mills-Koonce, & Reznick, 2009) – effects that can extend into adulthood. At school entry, children from families experiencing disadvantage often lag behind their peers in their language and communication skills.

The importance of families in early childhood education and care is now widely recognised, and it's not uncommon to see calls for effective partnerships with families. For example, "The role of ECEC services is to support and complement parents, rather than replace them" (PWC Australia, 2011). Indeed, the National Quality Framework Partnership recognises that *...learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families* (DEEWR 2009). Yet to date, partnership has often been interpreted as "involving" parents in early childhood education and care, seeking practical parental contribution to the services and programs, rather than seeking to support parents in their parenting role. The dialogue is also often constructed around engaging parents with professionally driven interests (e.g., understanding the nature of early education), rather than core parental concerns or issues.

We believe there is now a significant opportunity for early childhood education and care services to reframe this way of thinking to a position that sets out to actively support parents in their parenting. This involves thinking of parents as collaborators in the joint aim of promoting children's wellbeing and development. It also involves thinking about how to extend the influence of services beyond the four walls of the agency into children's.

We argue that early childhood services could be more effective in the provision of **parenting support**—activity that involves supporting the development of strong parent-child relationships and positive parent-child interaction—as well as **parent support**—activity that strengthens parental wellbeing, enhancing parental coping and reducing negative stress on family relationships.

Early childhood services and parenting support (activity that involves supporting the development of strong parent-child relationships and positive parent-child interaction)

With funding from the Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, we recently completed a large-scale study that designed and evaluated a service enhancement initiative aimed at strengthening the parenting support offered through early childhood services.

The purpose of the Early Home Learning study

The aim of the study was to find out whether enhanced early childhood services could effectively engage parents of developmentally vulnerable children and support parents in creating a more stimulating early home learning environment. These questions were significant because (a) effectively engaging vulnerable families in preventative parenting programs has proven to be very difficult, and (b) whilst parenting factors are implicated in child development, it has also proved difficult to achieve parental behaviour change at a level that would be required to alter childhood developmental outcomes.

A community based cluster randomised controlled trial

The Early Home Learning project involved working with Maternal and Child Health and Supported Playgroups across 20 communities in Victoria in a study that involved over 2,000 families experiencing social disadvantage. For the Maternal and Child Health approach, we added an active parenting skills component to 6-week parenting groups modelled on first time parents groups. For the Supported Playgroups platform, we added parenting content, restructuring of groups to promote parent-child interaction, and facilitator training in *light-touch* parenting support techniques such as modelling and taking advantage of incidental teaching opportunities. The final component evaluated in the study was individualised home-coaching, involving five to six visits delivered concurrently with participation in either a Maternal and Child Health parenting group or a supported playgroup.

This was a highly focused intervention. The primary objective was to increase the frequency of high quality every-day parent-child interactions, and specifically five key parenting practices which have been shown by research to be associated with optimal child development:

1. Tuning in (paying attention and being psychologically present)
2. Talking and listening (engaging in 'to and fro' verbal and non-verbal interactions)
3. Following your child's lead (joint attention and building on child's interests)
4. Teachable moments (using child initiated opportunities to promote further learning)
5. Warmth and gentleness (parenting style and tone)

We called the intervention component ‘smalltalk.’ We compared standard (unmodified supported playgroups or parenting groups), to smalltalk groups, to smalltalk groups plus home-coaching.

Our findings

Our finding showed that parents of young children who are at risk of missing out on the day-to-day experiences that would enhance their early learning and development, can be successfully engaged, retained and supported in their early parenting.

Our participants included parents:

- Whose children showed early signs of possible developmental vulnerability (e.g. born low birth weight, low score on a routine pediatric assessment of development)
- Who were young, single, had low education, or had a low income (as indicated by government benefits, health care card), or for whom English was not their first language
- Who lacked confidence in their parenting, was experiencing psychological distress or lacked social support.

We found measurable improvements in the nature and frequency of parent-child interactions known to support child development have been achieved in the real world context of early childhood service provision. Specifically, we found that (Hackworth et al., 2013):

- Parents of developmentally vulnerable children were engaged, retained and responded positively to parenting support provided through enhancements to existing early childhood services
- Parents benefited (i.e., showed increases in quality parent-child interactions) from participation in parenting and playgroups, and appeared to benefit to a greater extent with the addition of individualised coaching support

Children who experience impoverished environments during the first three years of life are particularly at risk of poorer educational and socio-emotional outcomes, effects that extend into more limited life opportunities in adulthood. We note extensive research that has shown that disadvantaged children can gain significant benefit from participation in high quality pre-school experiences, and that one important marker of quality is the extent to which services *‘help parents to support their children’s learning at home’* (Melhuish 2013). Our research has shown

that a highly implementable service improvement initiative can increase the impact of early childhood services in enhancing parenting practices associated with optimal child development. We believe that a broad range of early childhood services could do likewise given the right opportunities and supports.

Early childhood services and parent support (activity that strengthens parental wellbeing, enhancing parental coping and reducing negative stress on family relationships)

Parenting occurs in a social context, and a whole range of social, family and personal adversities can impair the capacity of adults to provide sensitive and nurturing parenting. Well known factors include poverty, mental health problems, chronic illness and disability. A social factor related to early childhood education and care that is less well understood in relation to its impact on parents and children is the workplace.

Australia, like many other countries, has had a policy focus on increasing parental (especially mothers') participation in paid employment (Jaumotte 2003, OECD 2007, OECD 2011). This has occurred in combination with a rising prevalence of poor quality, often casualised jobs (Lyndall Strazdins, Korda, Lim, Broom, & D'Souza, 2004; L. Strazdins, Shipley, & Broom, 2007).

Our own work and that of colleagues, shows that poor quality jobs, pose mental health risks for employed parents and developmental risks for their children. This impact on child wellbeing occurs when mothers *or* fathers work in bad jobs, and although modest, has similar effects to those observed for low income and poor parental education. Specifically, Australian research with the parents of young children has found:

- Parents employed in poorer quality jobs (jobs that lack paid leave provisions, flexible hours, job control and security) have higher rates of distress than parents in higher quality jobs (Cooklin, Canterford, Strazdins, & Nicholson, 2010, 2011; Cooklin et al., in press; Giallo, Cooklin, Wade, D'Esposito, & Nicholson, 2012; Giallo, D'Esposito, et al., 2013; L. Strazdins et al., 2007).
- The effects of poor parental job quality flow through to the next generation, with the children of these parents showing elevations in their levels of socio-emotional difficulties (Giallo, Cooklin, Wade, D'Esposito, & Nicholson, 2013; Giallo et al., 2012; L. Strazdins, Shipley, Clements, O'Brien, & Broom, 2010).

- These patterns show stepwise increments in parents' mental health difficulties with worsening job quality. For example, after accounting for a variety of known risk factors for adult mental health difficulties, we found that employed mothers of an infant had a 40% increased risk of psychosocial distress for each reduction in favourable employment conditions (Cooklin et al., 2011), whilst fathers of infants who were employed in the lowest quality jobs had a five-fold increased risk of psychosocial distress compared to those in the best quality jobs (Giallo, D'Esposito, et al., 2013).
- Long work hours – particularly long hours worked by fathers – limit the time that parents are able to spend with their children in developmentally important activities such as reading, with the effects most pronounced for the lowest income families (Brown, Bittman, & Nicholson, 2007).

We now have a number of Australian studies that show that socio-economic disadvantage, poor quality jobs, long work hours and unsociable work hours place families under strain and put children's early life development at risk. These findings are of particular concern given the changing nature of the Australian workforce. With the growth of casual jobs and consequent lack of employment safeguards and conditions, increasing numbers of children from financially disadvantaged homes are likely to be exposed to the adverse effects of their parents' poor quality jobs.

The nature of parents' employment and their income also impact on childcare choices and opportunities. As observed earlier, the developmental benefits of high quality childcare are greatest for children from disadvantaged homes (OECD, 2011), yet low income families are less likely to use formal early childhood education and care services than middle/high income families (OECD, 2011).

This has a number of implications for the early childhood education and care sector. First, it suggests that policy making in early childhood and workplace and employment should proceed in tandem. Addressing workplace conditions that limit fathers and mothers' ability to balance their work and family lives will reduce pressure on parents and in turn benefit children.

Secondly, the issue also goes to the question of accessible, flexible and high quality services. Lack of access to quality services exacerbates the strain on parents, thus increasing developmental risk in children. For early childhood services to effectively make a difference in the healthy

development of young children from vulnerable circumstances, they need to be structured to fit with the demands of working families and be active and effective in engaging and supporting parents from more vulnerable circumstances, including those enduring poor work conditions.

Accessing parents views on childcare from RCN

Connecting with parent views and daily issues, and incorporating 'parent voice' into the development of messages and information intended for parent audiences is an important element to Raising Children Network's work. Our research indicates that parents learn about how to raise their children alongside their children's own learning and development.

[Raising Children Network hosts 25 parent forums that facilitate](#) parent-to-parent learning, story sharing, airing questions and concerns about raising children of all ages and abilities. The forums include 'Parents Like Me' forums, for mothers, fathers, expectant fathers, Aboriginal parents, grandparents and kinship carers, single parents, step parents, adoptive and foster parents and same sex parents. Parents look for markers along the way that let them know they are on track, doing the right thing or how to respond to issues. In addition to the benefits to parents in taking up opportunities to build virtual communities, it enables us to ensure the site is responsive to parent needs and views.

RCN would welcome the opportunity to host a parent forum on the issue of childcare should the Productivity Commission wish to consult with groups of parents not usually part of Inquiry deliberations. We have good online access to parents and families living in rural and remote Australia as well as those in urban environments.

Recommendations

1. The effectiveness of early childhood services in optimising the development of young children, especially children vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes, could be significantly enhanced by building capacity for parenting and parent support.
2. This would require investment in workforce capacity building, specifically in developing worker skills in engaging parents, holding constructive conversations with parents, and providing brief opportunistic support and information.
3. To increase the positive impact of services on the home learning environment, another important element in workforce development is ensuring that workers in early childhood education and care can competently and reliably demonstrate behaviours known to promote child development (such as those described above in the Early Home Learning Study), and model and coach parents in using these behaviours at home. The Early Home Learning Study has demonstrated that it is possible to assist early childhood services to increase the impact they have on the home learning environment.
4. Early childhood services could effectively become 'parenting resource' services. This potential could be largely realised by the systematic embedding of online information supports, such as those provided by the Raising Children Network. In addition to the quality assurance and accuracy this would bring to the information shared with parents, the range of resources would substantially increase the proactive information strategy (i.e., health promotion) and reactive information's strategy (i.e., responding to parents' information needs).
5. Developments in workplace and employment policy need to keep pace with early childhood. Increasing workplace flexibility, decreasing workplace stress, supporting employers to have positive and constructive conversations with employees about issues related to the work-family interface, will benefit parents, with advantages flowing through to their children. In the meantime, access to affordable high quality childcare, especially when delivered with a high level of competence in parent engagement and strong service parent relationships, will mitigate some of the family stress that could have negative effects on child development and wellbeing.
6. The Inquiry consider the opportunity to access 'parent voices' on early childhood services through RCN parent forums.

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