

SNAPSHOT

Evaluation of Queensland Early Years Centres

North Gold Coast and Browns Plains



The Early Years Centres (EYC) are one-stop-shops or service hubs supporting the health, development, wellbeing and safety of families who have young children aged up to eight years. The centres offer a range of universal and targeted early childhood education, care and health services, such as playgroups, parenting support and education programs, home visiting, family support, and long day care and kindergarten.

The Benevolent Society runs three of the four Early Years Centres in Queensland, covering nine locations plus mobile outreach.

This snapshot presents the key findings of an internal evaluation of the North Gold Coast (NGC) and Browns Plains (BP) centres undertaken between 2011 and 2013.

Key Points

- The EYCs offer a range of universal and targeted services including early childhood education and care, early childhood health services (eg. antenatal information and care, healthy child checks, vaccinations, access to specialist paediatric assessments and services), playgroups, parenting programs, home visiting and family support.
- A key feature of the EYCs is the employment of multidisciplinary staff to promote seamless service delivery in a single location.
- The EYCs are reaching their intended clients, in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and families living in the most disadvantaged local areas.
- Families attending the Centres have high levels of parenting and concrete support needs.
- Most families enter the EYCs through informal groups or playgroups.
- Families are accessing the full range of services, with large numbers attending the general playgroup and accessing family support.
- While accessing the EYCs families' knowledge of child development and parenting practices improved significantly, and they were more likely to demonstrate positive parenting behaviours and have access to concrete support.

ABOUT THE EARLY YEARS CENTRES (EYCs)

The Queensland Government announced the Early Years initiative in 2006 and committed \$32 million over four years to establish four centres across the state, each with satellite services in neighbouring communities to extend their reach. The Benevolent Society runs the EYCs in North Gold Coast, Brown Plains and Cairns, established in 2008, 2009 and 2011 respectively. The fourth centre, which is operated by a different organisation (The Gowrie), is in Caboolture.

The EYCs are funded by the Queensland Government's Office for Early Childhood Education and Care (OECEC). Their objectives are to:

Provide a more integrated early childhood service delivery system and support the health, wellbeing and safety of families who have young children aged 0 – 8 years and, in particular, clients who identify themselves as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders, culturally and linguistically diverse, children with a disability and other vulnerable families¹.

Each EYC is located in a socio-economically disadvantaged area (according to the SEIFA index)² with high numbers of children who are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). The EYCs are staffed through partnerships between The Benevolent Society, Queensland Health, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social service providers, the Creche and Kindergarten Association, and other local service providers.

THE AIM OF THE EVALUATION

To assess the extent to which the EYCs were meeting their objectives, The Benevolent Society undertook an evaluation of the North Gold Coast and Browns Plains centres between 2011 and 2013. The evaluation of Cairns EYC was undertaken at a later date and is reported on separately.

The evaluation explored whether the EYCs were:

- providing more integrated early childhood service delivery
- supporting the health, wellbeing and safety of families who have young children aged 0 – 8 years (in particular, clients who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse, and/or have disabilities).

Specifically, the evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

1. How effective are the EYCs in increasing families' access to early intervention programs?
2. How effective are the EYCs in improving family and community outcomes?

To assist in the development of the centres and service improvement, it also sought to identify:

3. What are the centres doing well?
4. What could the centres do better and what needs to change?

METHODOLOGY

Using validated instruments, the evaluation involved surveying and interviewing staff and stakeholders, and gathering information via document analysis and observation. In addition, families were asked to complete a survey at the beginning of the evaluation (baseline) and then again 6 and 12 months later (follow-up). A literature review was also undertaken.

1. Queensland Government. (2008). *Early Years Centre operational guidelines*.

2. *Socio-economic indexes for areas*.

FINDINGS

1. How effective are the EYCs in increasing families' access to early intervention programs?

What services do the EYCs provide and are they delivered according to best practice?

In line with the latest research evidence and best practice, the EYCs provide a mix of programs and services, ranging from universal services for everyone through to more targeted specialist supports, including:

- informal, relatively unstructured groups focused on social connection and attachment
- child health and development consultations
- ante- and post-natal support
- health screening, assessments and immunisations
- playgroups and supported playgroups
- parenting information, education and support groups
- family support programs including home visiting and counselling
- quality early childhood education and care services (including providing and/or facilitating access to kindergarten programs)
- pathways to education and employment initiatives
- referrals and support to access other programs and specialist services.

Partnerships and integration are key features of the EYC model. Interviews with partner organisations suggest that the multiple partners involved in each EYC (including The Benevolent Society) are increasingly working together to plan and deliver services in an integrated manner. All partners who participated in the evaluation were generally confident in the effectiveness of the partnerships and committed to their contribution. Partners identified the importance of continually reviewing partnerships to ensure that they continue to meet the changing needs and conditions of local communities.

Are the EYCs reaching their intended clients?

The EYCs target families who are expecting a child or have children up to and including eight years of age with a particular focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children with a disability and vulnerable families.

The results show that, at the time of the evaluation, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families were over-represented as clients of both the North Gold Coast and Brown Plains centres, when compared to the general population of each area. Culturally and linguistically diverse families were also over-represented at North Gold Coast.

The results indicate that both EYCs are also successfully targeting vulnerable families. Families who attended North Gold Coast were more likely than members of the broader local population to experience socio-economic disadvantage. At Browns Plains, which is located in a more disadvantaged area, families were representative of the local population.

At the NGC EYC, not only were they reaching their intended families, but Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families, culturally and linguistically diverse families, and families who reside in the most disadvantaged local areas tended to use the EYCs more often and/or over longer periods of time than other families.

The success of the EYCs in reaching their intended clients is likely to be due in part to the considerable use of outreach programs, such as mobile playgroups, to access families who may not traditionally attend centre-based services. Each of the centres has also developed solid partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community partners. For example, both centres fund local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services (that is, Ganyjuu Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Family Support Services and Kalwun Development Corporation) to recruit, employ and supervise family support workers who are based at the centres. These unique partnerships appear to have directly contributed to the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and staff at each centre.

What needs do local families have when they begin using the EYCs?

A key feature of the EYCs is the employment of multidisciplinary staff to promote seamless service delivery in a single location. This means that problems can be identified early by workers in the services that families use every day and additional supports can be provided if and when they are needed.

As part of the evaluation, the needs of families visiting the centres were explored in relation to parenting, child behaviour problems, social support, concrete support and personal wellbeing.

The most commonly identified needs related to confidence in dealing with individual parenting issues, anticipating child development needs and developmentally inappropriate expectations of children. A lack of knowledge about the ways to support children's brain development and learning, children's involvement in developmentally supportive activities and a lack of concrete support were also identified.

Parenting needs

A large proportion of parents at both EYCs – 30% at North Gold Coast and 45% at Browns Plains - agreed that there were many times that they didn't know what to do as a parent. Almost 90% of North Gold Coast and more than half of Brown Plains parents also didn't know what to expect when it came to their child's development.

Only 58% of North Gold Coast parents and one third of Browns Plains parents said they never lost control when disciplining their children.

Child behaviour problems

In relation to child behaviour problems, nearly one third of North Gold Coast and nearly two thirds of Browns Plains parents reported behaviours that suggested their children had at least moderate attention difficulties. On average, two thirds of parents from both centres reported behaviours that suggested their children had at least moderate self-control difficulties.

Social support

The evaluation showed that many families were experiencing social support difficulties. Over one-third of parents at both centres reported that sometimes when they needed support they hadn't been able to find it anywhere. Just over a fifth of families attending Browns Plains also reported that they did not have others they could talk to when they were lonely or in crisis.

Concrete support

Over one third of families at both EYCs were unsure where to turn if their family needed food or housing. A similar percentage said they were not sure where to go if they needed help finding a job.

Personal wellbeing

According to the survey results, most North Gold Coast parents were very satisfied with their life as a whole, feeling part of a community and their relationships. Despite this, around a quarter were less satisfied with their life as a whole and their relationships that the general Australian population and over one third were less satisfied about feeling part of a community. These results suggest that there is a subgroup of highly marginalised clients among North Gold Coast parents.

Almost half of the Browns Plains parents, on the other hand, were less satisfied with their life as a whole and feeling part of a community than the general population, with more than a third less satisfied with their personal relationships.

Across both EYCs, families who resided in the most disadvantaged local areas recorded lower levels of satisfaction with life. Those who had lower levels of social support were more likely to report lower levels of satisfaction with their life, relationships and feeling part of a community.

Nurturing and attachment

The results suggest that at the time parents began going to the EYCs, most Browns Plains (92%) and North Gold Coast (98%) parents were already demonstrating high levels of nurturing behaviours and felt strongly attached to their children.

Child safety

At the time they began using the EYCs, almost half of NGC and two thirds of BP people surveyed reported that when they disciplined their child they lost control, at least sometimes.

Do the services delivered by EYCs match local family needs?

The evaluation clearly shows that parents attending the centres have multiple needs. The EYC model was intentionally designed to provide seamless access to a range of services for families that need them. The rationale behind this approach is that universal services provide soft entry points to more targeted support as problems are identified or arise, so that clients do not have to seek them out and can therefore avoid any associated stigma.

The programs and services provided through the EYCs appeared to provide opportunities to address most of the needs identified for families at the time they entered each EYC. The results showed that most families entered each EYC through soft entry programs such as informal groups or playgroups. Notably, however, more than a third of BPEYC families and more than a quarter of NGCEYC families first contact with the EYC was through family support services. Although families were accessing the full range of services some services were used much more than others. The general playgroup and family support, in both locations, were attended by large numbers of families. In contrast, relatively few families participated in parenting programs.

Analysis of the data suggests that after entering the EYC many families did move between programs and services, including from universal to targeted services. However, they most commonly moved between different types of universal group based activities.

During the evaluation period 43% of NGC families made use of more than one type of program or service and 13% made use of between three to five programs/services. The figures for Browns Plains were 38% and 16% respectively.

Are local families accessing services that meet their specific needs?

It was expected that parents with social support needs would go to groups to build their social networks; parents with child behaviour and parenting needs would participate in early childhood education and care groups and parenting programs; and parents with concrete supports need would access family support workers.

The results suggest, however, that families weren't always accessing the most appropriate service for their needs. For example, clients with social support needs and/or family or community dissatisfaction tended to use parenting programs or family support services. They tended not to access group based activities that could assist them to form more sustainable social and community support networks. In addition, many families with high concrete support needs were not accessing family support services.

The results do, however, suggest an improvement in terms of client targeting since the first six months of evaluation data collection. At that time, clients with social support needs overwhelmingly access family support services to the exclusion of all others.

2. How effective are the EYCs in improving family and community outcomes?

Family outcomes were identified by comparing the surveys completed by parents at baseline and follow-up. Follow-up surveys were completed by 60 parents at North Gold Coast and 14 parents at Browns Plains.

The vast majority of respondents only used early childhood education and care groups and so the outcomes may not be generalisable to the broader EYC population. The data for Browns Plains also needs to be interpreted with caution due to the low number of clients who completed surveys at both points in time.

Parenting outcomes

The findings indicate that families experienced a number of positive changes while they were accessing the EYCs. Families showed improvements in knowledge of child development and parenting confidence and enjoyment. Specifically parents were significantly more likely to disagree at follow-up that:

- when it comes to my child's development, I don't know what to expect
- there are many times I don't know what to do as a parent.

Parents also demonstrated increased nurturing and attachment feelings and behaviours. They were significantly more likely to agree that they enjoyed being a parent and that they spent time with their child doing things that children like to do. They also reported spending more time talking to their children, playing outdoors, reading and visiting friends who have children.

Although not statistically significant, it is noteworthy that many of the parents who initially indicated the greatest tendency to lose control when they disciplined their child reported losing control less often at follow-up. Similarly, most parents changed their opinion about whether a one year old should know the difference between right and wrong, acknowledging that one year olds would not know the difference.

The fact that families demonstrated improved short and medium term outcomes in knowledge, confidence and parenting behaviour suggests that their children are now more likely to achieve positive longer term learning and development outcomes.

Social and concrete support outcomes

Overall, the evaluation revealed no significant changes in social support reported by families at either EYC. However, the fact that families were more frequently visiting friends with children at follow-up suggests that families may be forming new social support networks. Families from both EYCs who reported the highest concrete support needs at baseline were significantly less likely to report needs at follow-up.

3. What are the centres doing well?

The evaluation findings highlight many ways in which both of the EYCs were successful. In particular, they offer a diverse range of universal and specialist services to address families' needs, and demonstrate best practice characteristics of effective integrated services. Effective partnerships have been established that facilitate seamless service delivery as well as engagement of hard to reach families. In addition, the programs and services the EYCs provide appear to match local area needs and are effective in supporting the development of parenting knowledge and practices that have been empirically shown to contribute to improved learning and child development outcomes over the longer term.

4. What could the centres do better and what needs to change?

The evaluation findings suggest a number of service delivery processes that could be improved. These include:

- reviewing the role and delivery of parenting programs, increasing program promotion, and integrating some programs into universal services
- reviewing ways in which family support links to other services and increasing family support involvement in universal services
- increasing the diversity of partner organisations attending advisory groups, and building partnerships with employment agencies to support client access to assistance to find employment
- more clearly articulating a shared vision and achievable goals within each EYC and between partners
- more active outreach to culturally and linguistically diverse families at Browns Plains to increase their representation at this EYC
- developing processes to ensure early identification of family needs and connecting families to appropriate programs and services
- improving data collection to facilitate ongoing evaluation of the EYCs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

- Underpinning the Early Years Centre model is research that shows it is far better to intervene early to prevent problems from occurring, or escalating, than to try to address them once they become entrenched. Early intervention not only leads to more positive outcomes for individuals and society, it is also cost-effective. The benefits are far-reaching and range from reduced contact with the juvenile and adult justice systems, reduced notifications of child abuse and neglect, through to improved school performance and better employment outcomes.
- The Benevolent Society commends the Queensland Government on establishing the Early Years Centres. Access to these centres is, however, currently very limited.
- Bipartisan commitment to long term planning and increased investment in early intervention is needed at all levels of government so that initiatives, such as the EYCs, can be established throughout Australia, in particular in areas of disadvantage.
- In order to ensure a more seamless service system for children and families, and more effective planning and resource management, there is a need for a much greater level of collaboration between different government departments, different levels of government and between government and non-government services.
- A commitment to ongoing research and evaluation is needed to continue to build the evidence base around what works in improving long-term outcomes for disadvantaged children and their families.

Acknowledgments

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We are The Benevolent Society

We help people change their lives through support and education, and we speak out for a just society where everyone thrives. We're Australia's first charity. We're a not-for-profit and non-religious organisation and we've helped people, families and communities achieve positive change since 1813.

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