

SNAPSHOT

Evaluation of Queensland Early Years Centres: Interim results



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 in total plus mobile outreach.

This snapshot presents the key interim findings of an internal evaluation of two of these centres. A final report, assessing the impact of the Early Years Centres on children and families, will be available later in 2014.

Key Points

- The Early Years Centres 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 assessment and services), playgroups, parenting programs, home visiting and family support.
- A key feature of the Early Years Centres is the employment of multidisciplinary staff to promote seamless service delivery in a single location.
- The Early Years Centres are reaching their intended clients, in particular Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and vulnerable families.
- Families attending the centres have high levels of parenting support needs.
- Social isolation and a lack of support were identified as major issues.
- Families are accessing the full range of services, with large numbers attending the general playgroup and accessing family support.
- Over 94% of clients would recommend the service to others.

ABOUT THE EARLY YEARS CENTRES

The Queensland Government announced the Early Years Centre initiative in 2006, and committed \$32 million over four years (2006–10) to establish four centres across the state, each with satellite services in neighbouring communities to extend their reach. The Benevolent Society runs the centres in North Gold Coast, Browns 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 centres are funded by the Queensland State 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, and/or experiencing disabilities).

Each EYC is located in a socio-economically disadvantaged area (according to the SEIFA¹ index) with high numbers of children who are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains according to the Australia Early Development Index (AEDI). The centres are staffed through partnerships between The Benevolent Society, Queensland Health, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island social service providers, the Crèche and Kindergarten Association, and other local service providers.

Services delivered through the centres include:

- quality early childhood education and care services (including providing and/or facilitating access to kindergarten programs)
- parenting information, education and support groups
- family support programs including home visiting and counselling
- playgroups and supported playgroups
- toy libraries
- child health and development consultations

- health screening, assessments and immunisations
- ante- and post-natal support
- pathways to education and employment initiatives
- referrals and support to access other programs and specialist services
- other services based on identified community need (eg. Family Mental Health Service, Parent Connect Service for developmental delay and disability, Family Intervention Service for intensive family support, Shaping Brains interventions to promote healthy brain development).

THE AIM OF THE EVALUATION

To assess the extent to which the Early Years Centres were meeting their objectives, The Benevolent Society undertook an evaluation of the North Gold Coast and Brown Plains services. At the time of the evaluation, the centre in Cairns was still being established.

In particular, the evaluation was interested in exploring 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 themselves as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse, and/or have disabilities).

METHODOLOGY

Using validated instruments, the evaluation involved surveying and interviewing staff and stakeholders as well as gathering information via document analysis and observation.

This snapshot presents the results of the analysis of baseline data collected between March 2011 and February 2012.

The evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

1. Are the EYCs reaching their intended clients?

¹ Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas

2. Do the EYCs provide multiple services that meet family needs?
3. Are EYC partnerships proceeding in line with best practice and are they sufficient to meet community needs?

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

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

FINDINGS

1. Are the EYCs reaching their intended clients?

The Early Years Centres 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, and vulnerable families.¹

The results show that the EYCs are reaching their intended clients. In fact, individuals who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander were over-represented as clients of the North Gold Coast and Brown Plains centres, when compared to the general population of the area. Culturally and linguistically diverse families were also over-represented at the North Gold Coast service.

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

The success of the Early Years Centres 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 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.

2. Do the EYCs provide multiple services that meet family needs?

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

A key feature of the Early Years Centres 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 they use everyday 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.

Parenting needs

The evaluation showed that families attending both centres had high levels of parenting support needs, with 30% of North Gold Coast and 45% of Browns Plains parents agreeing that there were many times that they didn't know what to do as a parent. Nearly a quarter of North Gold Coast and 41% of Brown Plains parents didn't know what to expect when it came to their child's development.

Only around half of North Gold Coast parents and a third of Brown Plains parents said they never lost control when disciplining their children. The results also showed that the majority of parents agreed with a number of statements that contradict current evidence regarding effective parenting practice.

Child behaviour problems

In relation to child behaviour problems, nearly a 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

In interviews with stakeholders, social isolation was consistently identified as one of the most important issues affecting the community. This was also reflected in the feedback from clients, with 41% of North Gold Coast and 67% of Browns Plains parents admitting not being able to get support from any family or friends when they had needed it.

Concrete support

In line with concerns about a lack of social support approximately a third of families were not sure that they would know where to turn if their family needed food or housing. Similar numbers indicated that they were not sure where to go if they needed help finding a job.

Personal wellbeing

Compared to a national Australian sample, both Browns Plains and North Gold Coast parents were less satisfied with feeling part of a community and Browns Plains parents were less satisfied with life as a whole. Specifically, 10% of North Gold Coast and just over a third of Browns Plains parents were dissatisfied or ambivalent about their life as a whole, while 23% of North Gold Coast clients and 38% of Browns Plains were dissatisfied or ambivalent about feeling part of a community.

Do the EYCs provide multiple services that could help families meet those needs?

The evaluation clearly showed that parents attending the centres have multiple needs. The EYC model was deliberately designed to provide seamless access to a range of services to families that need them. The

rationale being that universal services provide soft entry points to more targeted support as problems are identified or arise, without requiring clients to seek them out and any associated stigma.

What the results clearly showed was that Early Years Centre clients were accessing the full range of services although 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 the parenting programs.

On average, North Gold Coast families remained with the Early Years Centre for 3.5 months and engaged with the centre nine times, while the Brown Plains families remained for 2.9 months and engaged with the centre seven times.

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 support needs would access family support workers.

Are families accessing the services that are best suited to meeting their needs?

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.

3. Are EYC partnerships proceeding in line with best practice and are they sufficient to meet community needs?

Interviews with partner organisations suggest that the multiple partners involved in each EYC (including The Benevolent Society) were increasingly working together to plan and deliver services in an integrated manner. However, it was also noted that engaging with additional partners such as employment services would be beneficial.

A feature of the integrated model is community involvement in influencing service programs and activities. While some clients are involved in service provision and advisory groups, the evaluation found that of all aspects of Early Years Centre service delivery, parents were least satisfied with feeling that they had a say in the types of services that the centres provided.

4. What are the centres doing well?

The evaluation findings highlight many ways in which the Early Years Centres are successful. In particular, the centres offer a diverse range of universal and specialist services to address families' needs. Effective partnerships have been established that facilitate more seamless service delivery as well as engagement of hard to reach families.

Over 94% of clients would recommend the service to others and 92% felt respected and listened to by staff.

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

Following internal evaluations at The Benevolent Society, staff used the results to identify areas for improvement. Practice Improvement Plans were developed and their implementation monitored.

As discussed, the Early Years Centre evaluation identified a number of service delivery processes that could be improved. Since then, Early Years Centre staff have implemented a number of improvement strategies. 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
- designing and developing socially oriented groups to target high-risk, vulnerable and/or isolated families; assisting isolated families to create a 'meet and greet' group in the park; and providing a crèche for children while their parents attend parenting education and support programs
- increasing the diversity of partner organisation attending advisory groups, and building partnerships with employment agencies to support client access to employment assistance
- more clearly articulating a shared vision and achievable goals within the centre and between partners
- more active outreach to CALD clients in Browns Plains to increase their representation in the centre
- increasing client involvement in planning and delivery of services
- improving data collection to facilitate ongoing evaluation of the services.

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 have 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 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 Early Years Centres. Access to these centres is, however, currently 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 Early Years Centres, 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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References

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

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