

Policy Position: Investment in Early Child Development Services

Purpose

This policy provides the Benevolent Society's public position on investment in early child development services¹. The Benevolent Society believes greater investment is needed in Australia's early child development system, including targeted investment for vulnerable children and their families so that all children have access to quality health, childcare and family support services, and are safe, healthy and able to fulfil their potential.

Key Messages

- A positive start in life helps children develop to their fullest. Healthy and happy children are more likely to become healthy and resilient adults who have the capacity, opportunity and resources to contribute to society.
- Investment in accessible and appropriate early child development services can reduce and minimise inequalities in outcomes between groups of children and improve children's development and learning in both the short and long term.
- Research shows that high-quality birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children can deliver a 13% per year return on investment.
- We know that children living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas are over four times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those children residing in the least disadvantaged areas.
- It is time for state, territory and commonwealth governments to work together to develop and fund place-based and prevention focussed early child development service models that respond to local community characteristics and are targeted to communities that want them.

Issue

A child who starts behind stays behind, which comes at enormous cost to him or her, the community and governments. Targeted, evidence-based early childhood interventions can prevent this from happening, and break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.¹

- There is clear evidence from Australia and overseas that the early years of a child's life have a profound impact on their future health, development, learning and wellbeing.²
- The first 1,000 days² of life are the period in which children are at their most adaptable, but also their most vulnerable. The external stressors experienced by a mother can be transferred to a child in utero, and the social circumstances of the family can directly influence the child's brain development, their long-term health and wellbeing and limit their ability to reach their full potential.³
- Children born into poverty, with families affected by mental health problems, alcohol or other drug misuse, homelessness and who experience abuse and neglect, are at a higher risk of poor developmental outcomes.⁴
- Children who experience adversity in their childhood show considerably poorer developmental outcomes compared to their more advantaged peers, with a widening gap emerging in the earliest years of life, prior to school entry.⁵ Delays in the development of high-level emotional and decision-making skills in early childhood create social and learning differences between children that widen over time and lead to poorer outcomes.⁶

¹ The term 'early child development' used in this policy is an umbrella term coined by Canadian Doctor, James Fraser Mustard to describe all elements of child development, including early learning, ECEC, maternal and child health.

² This policy recognises that NSW Health has released The First 2000 Days Framework in February 2019. The Framework has chosen to expand the focus beyond the first 1000 days to the first 2000 days of life to incorporate additional evidence that quality early education in the preschool years has a strong bearing on long term outcomes.

- Children at risk of experiencing vulnerability, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse, refugee and children with disabilities often attend formal early child education and health services at lower rates than their more advantaged peers and have more complex support needs when moving through early childhood systems.⁷
- Vulnerable children and families can have difficulty finding out about and accessing the services they need and have less ability to travel to or pay even small fees for services if they are available.⁸
- In regional, rural or remote communities, or communities with significant Aboriginal populations where disadvantage is entrenched and developmental vulnerability increasing, early child development services may be poorer, fragmented or not available at all.⁹
- For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children these barriers to accessing services can be compounded by mainstream services lack of cultural awareness and competence, the limited availability of Aboriginal community controlled services and the legacy of past government practices, including forced removal of children.¹⁰
- Investment in accessible and appropriate early child development services can reduce and minimise inequalities in outcomes between groups of children and improve children's cognitive development and learning in both the short and long term. Research shows that high-quality birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children can deliver a 13% per year return on investment.¹¹

What the Benevolent Society is doing

- The Benevolent Society has a long history of supporting families and communities to care safely for their children and advocating for policy reform that supports families. We provide services across the continuum from universal early years' programs, community building and parenting programs to promote family functioning and wellbeing, to more targeted and intensive family support services to strengthen families, who may be vulnerable, experiencing disadvantage or whose children may be at risk of entering out-of-home care.
- The Benevolent Societies' Early Years Centres (EYCs) 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 employ a multidisciplinary staff who offer a range of universal and targeted early child development and support, maternity and child health services, home visiting, targeted family support, and long day care and kindergarten.
- EYCs are located in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (according to the SEIFA index) where higher numbers of children who are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) live. EYC's work in partnership with other non-government service providers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations and the Queensland Government.
- The Benevolent Society is building a long-term national campaign, in alliance with over 20 partner organisations, to deliver a coordinated approach to improve the wellbeing and safety of children across Australia. A key component of the Every Child Campaign is the creation of a Future Fund for Child Wellbeing and Safety targeted to support vulnerable children with assistance and services that meet their development needs.

What needs to be done?

The Benevolent Society supports and will advocate for:

- The Commonwealth Government to fully fund and ensure universal access to high quality preschool for all three and four year old children.
- State, territory and commonwealth governments to fund the expansion of Child and Family Centres nationally to provide accessible, integrated wrap around service to vulnerable families in areas of significant disadvantage with locations of new centres informed by the release of the 2018 AEDC and the SEIFA Index .

- Place based and prevention focussed approaches to development of integrated service models that are responsive to local characteristics and need.
- State, territory and commonwealth governments to provide sustainable funding and support the growth of a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled early year's sector and workforce.
- The Commonwealth Government to establish a Future Fund for Child Wellbeing and Safety that has investment capability and is used to fund support for children who are developmentally vulnerable. The Fund should be supported by a cooperative national research program to inform strategic policy and program development and implementation arising from the Fund.

Background

When was the last time a Government had a big idea for children in Australia?¹²

- A positive start in life helps children develop to their fullest. Healthy and happy children are more likely to become healthy and resilient adults who have the capacity, opportunity and resources to contribute to society.
- Growing evidence shows that at least some types of early care and education reduce the risk of child maltreatment and improve developmental outcomes for children who are maltreated and/or living in non-parental care arrangements.¹³
- The 2018 AEDC found that 21.7 per cent of all Australian children were 'developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains', meaning that they were commencing school already behind their same-aged peers.¹⁴
- Children who experience 'toxic stress' in early childhood such as poverty, family violence or alcohol and other drug misuse are more likely to experience adverse outcomes in later life.¹⁵
- Toxic stress activates the body's alert systems, increasing a child's stress hormones and can cause permanent changes in their brain structure and function.¹⁶
- Children living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas were over four times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those children residing in the least disadvantaged areas in Australia.¹⁷
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are half as likely to attend early learning services as non-Indigenous children and are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable as non-Indigenous children.¹⁸
- The timing of childhood poverty matters, with deprivation experienced in the first five years of life recognised as a particularly robust predictor of poorer outcomes later in life.¹⁹

Consultation

The following were consulted in the development of this policy:

- Child and Family Policy reference working group

Approval

This policy has been approved by the Executive Director, Strategic Engagement, Research & Advocacy on 6 May 2019

Related Policies

Poverty

Public Health Model

Principles

The following principles underpin The Benevolent Society's Child and Family Policy Framework and have been developed to guide our social policy platform.

1. All children have the right to grow up in an environment free from neglect and abuse.
2. Children have the right to have a voice in all decisions affecting them.
3. Systems and institutions must address the social determinants, including poverty and social exclusion.
4. Policy, practice and advocacy is outcome focussed, evidence based, measurable and evaluated.

5. Children are best cared for by family and kin where possible and every effort should be made so that children can remain with, and return to, their families.
6. Australian society has a responsibility to value, support and work in partnership with parents, families and communities care for children.
7. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families have the right to self-determination.
8. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have a right to grow up in culture.
9. Children and families with disabilities have the right to full and effective participation and inclusion in society.
10. Children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse families and refugees have the right to full and effective participation and inclusion in society.

Endnotes

¹ Pascoe, Susan., Brennan, Deborah., (2017) Lifting our Game. Report of the review to achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions.P8

² Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy, Council of Australian Governments (2009) Canberra

³ Moore,T.G., Arefadib,N., Deery,A., Keyes,M. &Wwest,S. (2017) The First 1000 Days: An Evidence Paper - Summary

⁴ Pascoe,Susan., Brennan, Deborah., (2017) Lifting our Game. Report of the review to achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions.P17

⁵ Monks, H. (2017). The impact of poverty on the developing child. [CoLab Evidence Report]. Retrieved from <https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/resources/>

⁶ Welsh, J. A., Nix, R. L., Blair, C., Bierman, K. L., & Nelson, K. E. (2010). The development of cognitive skills and gains in academic school readiness for children from low-income families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(1),43–53. doi:10.1037/a0016738

⁷<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/professionals/learning/Transition%20to%20School%20Vulnerability%20Project%20Literature%20Review.pdf>

⁸ <https://vcoss.org.au/analysis/vulnerable-children-need-more-than-buildings-for-early-learning/>

⁹ *The Invisible Children, The State of Country Children's Health and Development in Australia* (2017). Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Centre for Community Child Health. Royal Far West.

¹⁰ Closing the Gap Clearing House (2013). Improving the early life outcomes of Indigenous children: implementing early childhood development at the local level, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Institute of Family Studies, viewed 16 January 2019 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/b46de39b-eeb5-4a98-87e8-44dad29f99b9/ctgc-ip06.pdf.aspx?inline=true> P8

¹¹ Heckman,James,. Research Summary: The Lifecycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program. Retrieved from <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/research-summary-lifecycle-benefits-influential-early-childhood-program/>

¹² Freyana Irani, The Children's Report, UNICEF (2018) Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org.au/about-us/media/november-2018/research-shows-australian-government-continuing-to>

¹³ Klein,S.,Mihalec-Adkins, B., Benson, S., Lee,S Y., (2018) *The benefits of early care and education for child welfare-involved children: Perspectives from the field.*

¹⁴ Australian Early Development Census 2016, *Australian Early Development Census Report 2015*, viewed 9 October 2018, <http://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2015-aedc-national-report>.

¹⁵ Monks, H. (2017). *The impact of poverty on the developing child.* [CoLab Evidence Report]. Retrieved from <https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/resources/>

¹⁶ Baker, S. (2017). Brain development in the early childhood [CoLab Evidence Report]. Retrieved from <https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/resources>

¹⁷ Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) 2015, *National report 2015: a snapshot of early childhood development in Australia*, Australian Department of Education and Training, retrieved 25 August 2016, <http://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2015-aedc-national-report>. P20

¹⁸Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Australia's welfare 2017: in brief* (October 2017)

¹⁹ Monks, H. (2017). *The impact of poverty on the developing child.* [CoLab Evidence Report]. Retrieved from <https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/resources/>