



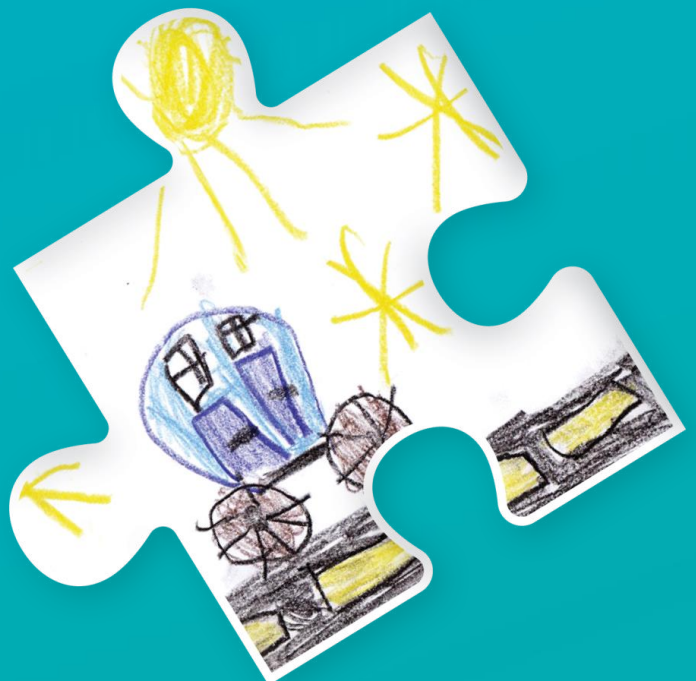
ACT
Government
Education



The future of **EDUCATION**

An ACT community conversation

Early Childhood Strategy



MINISTER'S INTRODUCTION

The start a child gets in life has the power to determine everything that follows.

As any parent will know, each day is special, and each day a child grows, develops and learns another important thing about our world. A huge part of a child's learning happens in informal contexts like the home. Part of a happy life, lived in the moment, involves children playing and exploring the world, and learning in the process.

But alongside this, deliberate education delivered in a more formal setting by qualified educators has an indisputable impact on early childhood development.

In Australia, the important role of early childhood education and care in child development has been a relatively recent realisation. For much too long Australians have understood this period of education as being about childcare; providing a safe place to put children while parents are at work. Educators have been understood as little more than physiological carers who wipe noses, change nappies and cut up fruit. But this is simply not correct.

A child begins learning even before birth. Very early on most learning and development is about acquiring the simple, vital skills required to survive in our world. Quickly, as infants become children, they rapidly acquire the foundations of cognition and memory, language, social and emotional competence, behaviour, and motor skills. These foundations are vital to learning throughout childhood, and can ultimately be determinative for life.

Traced back to its causes, inequality in our society can be seen as at least partially a consequence of differences in childhood learning and development.

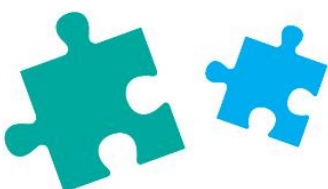
Children universally need access to high quality early childhood education. But in the ACT there is a significant number of children who do not access a sufficient quantity of high quality early childhood education the year before preschool. More than 20 per cent of children are developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains at the start of kindergarten. As many as 20 per cent of children between 1 and 4 years old, before preschool, do not have access to structured early education—the gap between 'blue book' and preschool. Vulnerable children and those experiencing disadvantage have a greater need than others. Instead of recognising and addressing this some policy settings, such as the new Child Care Benefit "activity test" and proposed "no jab, no play" rules, are likely to create barriers to access and entrench inequality.

In committing to develop an Early Childhood Strategy, the ACT Government is seeking to arrest the structural inequality that exists in early childhood learning and development and tackle some key challenges.

Culturally, early childhood education and care has been treated as intended to enable workforce participation, particularly for women. This is an important contribution. Equally important is the education being provided in this setting and the educational primacy of services needs to be elevated.

In contrast to primary and secondary education, early childhood education and care services can operate for private profit. This situation has allowed a market to emerge where providers have incentives and are challenged by pressures other than delivering the best possible outcome for the children in their care.

Educators, the people actually providing the service, are also seriously undervalued. For children to get the start they need educators need to be valued highly as a profession, and the profession



itself enhanced. Improved training and professional development and better access to resources and tools will help educators facilitate learning. And educators need good, secure jobs.

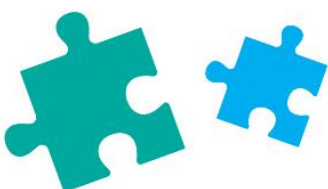
The ACT community clearly has some big challenges to tackle in early childhood education and care. Getting this right will provide the basis of the future of our education system. As I saw in Finland during my visit in May 2017, universal education during the early years of life is the cornerstone to setting children on a path to their best future. It's one of the key things that the best education systems in the world do well. It's something that the ACT must do well.

This first discussion paper is the start of a conversation that will pursue some key themes that our community has already raised and that can be seen in existing research.

I welcome your ideas and contribution!

Yvette Berry

Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development



AN EARLY CHILDHOOD STRATEGY

In the ACT, early childhood education and care services are provided through a range of government and non-government settings. Alongside these services are a range of community and health services that support the development of children in their early years. Holistic interventions are needed. Parents also need more support and to be better equipped as their child's first teacher.

An Early Childhood Strategy will provide a comprehensive, joined-up policy framework to guide the delivery of early childhood services and coordinate education, health and community service provision.

ACT early childhood education and care services both need to deliver high quality early childhood development and also support workforce participation, particularly for women, and therefore need to be:

- > high quality and accessible
- > flexible and available in a range of settings
- > delivered in a safe, nurturing and inclusive environment
- > targeted for improved participation by vulnerable and disadvantaged children
- > effectively linked with health and community service provision.

An established evidence base on quality early childhood education and care in the ACT along with input from early childhood education and care stakeholders highlights key themes that will be addressed through the process for developing the strategy:

- > access, equity and affordability
- > workforce and qualifications
- > transitions from education and care to school
- > maximising the benefit to children from money spent.

Discussion of these themes is essentially rooted in a clear understanding of the importance of early childhood education.

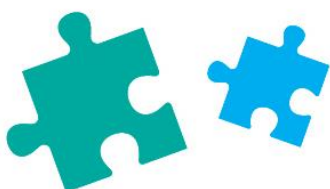
Early childhood education is important

The first three to four years of life are critical for a child's learning and development. Children's brains develop rapidly from birth, with healthy brain development setting the foundation for learning and positive social relationships.

"Like it or not, the most important mental and behavioural patterns, once established, are difficult to change once children enter school." (Heckman & Wax, 2004)¹.

Children significantly benefit from participating in quality early learning programs. They are more likely to make a successful transition to school, stay longer in school, continue on to further

¹ *cited in Melhuish. E., Early years experience and longer-term child development: Research and implications for policymaking, 2011*

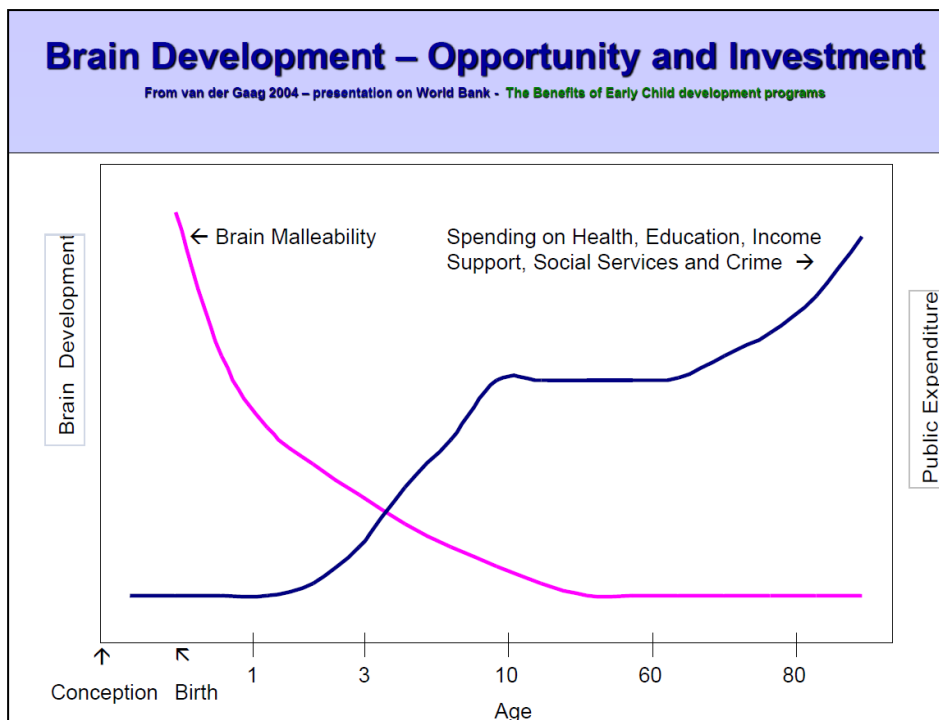


education, and fully participate in employment and community life as adults. The substantial life-long benefits these children experience include:

- the ability to self-regulate, manage emotions and behaviour
- learning how to learn, and
- longer engagement in schooling and improved academic performance.

Children who participate in quality early education and care experience these benefits irrespective of their family, social or economic context.

High quality early childhood education and care is part of the fabric of a successful society. The chart below² demonstrates that investing in services targeted at the early years of a child's life has maximum positive impact on their education, social and wellbeing trajectory.



Further reading

OECD (2017), *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education*

<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/starting-strong-v-9789264276253-en.htm>

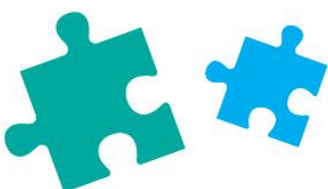
Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (2017), *Education Australia Fair? Education Inequality in Australia*

http://bcec.edu.au/assets/099068_BCEC-Educate-Australia-Fair-Education-Inequality-in-Australia_WEB.pdf

AEDC Resources, Centre for Community Health, *Policy Briefs*

<http://www.rch.org.au/ccch/policybrief/>

² cited in Melhuish, E., *Early Years as Preparation for Life: Lessons from research*, 2012



Further reading

Mitchell Report (2016), *Quality Early Education for All: Fostering creative, entrepreneurial, resilient and capable learners*

<http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Quality-Early-Education-for-All-FINAL.pdf>

Edward Melhuish (2014), *The impact of early childhood education and care on improved wellbeing*

<http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2641&context=sspapers>

Start Strong (2011), *The Economics of Children's Early Years: Early Care and Education in Ireland, Costs and Benefits*

http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Economics_of_Childrens_Early_Years.pdf

KEY THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

Access to affordable quality early childhood education and care

Access, equity and affordability are core values in ACT school and early childhood education and care systems. A family's socio-economic status can impact on a child's experience, meaning that often the children who would benefit the most from early childhood education and care assistance are the least likely to receive it. Cost is a key barrier to accessing early childhood education and care in the ACT, where services are the most expensive when compared nationally.

Currently in the ACT, 15 hours a week of free government preschool is provided for children who are four years of age on or before 30 April of the year of commencement. However there is no universal access for children from 0-3 years old to education and care services and there is currently no single way to engage all families prior to their children entering school.

A sizable proportion of ACT children between the ages of one and four who are experiencing disadvantage are missing out, with potentially between 15 to 20 per cent of children between the ages of one and four not able to access structured early education services prior to preschool. This gap arises between the end of post-natal health services (tracked through the 'blue book') and the start of preschool.

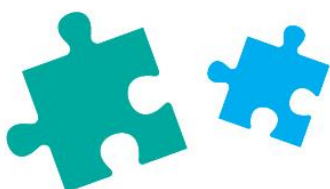
Effective service models that engage and retain children and families experiencing barriers to accessing early childhood education and care require centres to be linked both with other services and organisations including schools, community and health services, and with the members of the community itself. Wider social benefits also arise, such as improving immunisation rates.

Inequality in access to quality early childhood education and care is perpetuated and compounds throughout school education. Children who participate in these services enter school with a head start on their learning and development. But this requires valued, skilled educators who are equipped with the training and resources needed to facilitate learning.

Attracting and retaining skilled and motivated educators

If early childhood education and care is to be refocused on its educational role, the educators facilitating learning in these settings need to be better valued and recognised for their work. The way the community values participation in early childhood education and care, which currently is more often seen as 'care' alone rather than developing children, undermines the professional role of educators.

A consequence has been low tenure and high turnover in the sector. Across the whole of the ACT's early education and care sector approximately 70 per cent of workers are part-time or



casual. The independent not-for-profit providers tend to have a higher proportion of full time workers and the for-profit and community not-for-profit categories tend to have a higher proportion of part-time workers. The marked increase in casual or contract workers in the sector over recent years has an impact on career paths and professional development.

There can be significant competition in the sector for workers and vacancies are difficult to fill. Non-government services are often unable to attract and retain qualified staff, and there is a shortage of qualified staff, particularly early childhood teachers in non-government centre-based services. Worker shortages may also be contributing to higher overall costs. However this situation is not translating into better wages and conditions across the sector.

Up-skilling and appropriately skilling the workforce will improve the education provided, as will improving the continuity of educators working with individual children. The ACT community also requires a better awareness of value of the professionalism, skills and knowledge of those working in the early childhood education and care sector and how the work they do translates into an improved school education, and ultimately life, for children.

Providing continuity for children through effective transitions

Transitions to school, and between early childhood education and care services, represent significant changes in a child's life. On any given day a child may need to transition between a number of education and care services. Effective transition strategies between early years settings, and again between schools, is an important aspect in promoting children's learning and wellbeing as a whole. However, there is no consistent approach in the ACT.

Successful transitions will benefit every child and provide a framework for parents and teachers to share information about a child's learning, strengths and interests.

Research on effective transitions highlights the importance of continuity between settings, including continuity of pedagogical approach and the impact of coordination and relationship building between early education providers, schools and families.

Partnerships and positive relationships between parties such as children, their parents and carers, early childhood education and care services, staff, and the wider community provides a strong foundation for transitions, as well as fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness to the community.

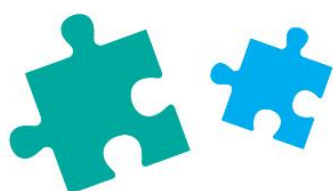
Transition policies and practices need to consider and be adapted to each particular context and meet the individual needs of a child to be effective in promoting smooth transitions for them.

Systematic approaches to effective transitions which provide continuity of knowledge about a child's development between early childhood education and care staff to school staff, also improve a child's confidence in managing change.

Maximising the benefit to children from money spent

The ACT government and community spend a large amount of money providing early childhood development services. This includes educational services like preschool and centre-based early childhood education, health services such as those provided by the Health Directorate's Maternal and Child Health nurses, and community services like those provided through the government Child and Family Centres as well as non-government community services, for example, playgroups. There are gaps and overlaps that reduce the effectiveness of money spent providing these services and reduce the possible benefit to children.

The experience of children and families accessing early childhood education and care in the ACT is often disjointed because of poor integration between delivery across government and non-



government services. At a very practical level, services are often provided at geographically disconnected locations.

The ACT's Human Services Blueprint is a multi-year plan to improve the way human services are delivered across Canberra. Building on this work greater cross-government collaboration in early childhood education and care is required.

Alongside better integrated government services, partnerships between the government and the early childhood education and care sector could aim to increase access and coordinated support for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families. The development of long term, quality relations within the early childhood education and care sector would improve the provision of both government and non-government services.

A systematic approach to co-location and coordination of key services such as child and family health, early childhood education and care, schools, and community services in the ACT has the potential to close gaps, reduce duplication of services and ultimately improve services. Children experiencing or at risk of disadvantage are more likely to be identified and supported when services are working together with the common goal of getting every child off to a great start.

CONCLUSION

Time spent in quality early childhood education and care is incredibly important for ensuring every child, regardless of their circumstances or background, can develop the learning, strengths and interests that allow them access an education that sets them up for a bright future.

The development of an Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT presents an opportunity to enhance the current approach to early childhood education and care in the Territory.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

How can the ACT increase children's access to affordable quality early childhood education and care, particularly prior to preschool?

How can early childhood education and care services in the ACT be more effectively utilised to provide services for families, especially those experiencing barriers to accessing quality early education?

How can early childhood education as a profession be enhanced through the right qualifications, training and professional development?

How can the non-government sector be better supported in recruiting, retaining and valuing qualified staff?

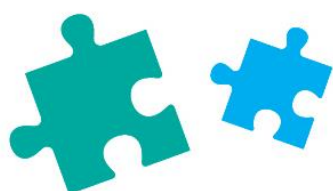
What do effective transitions between early childhood education and care services and schools look like?

How can consistency of quality and effective transitions for our children be ensured?

How could government and non-government providers partner to make the best use of infrastructure and the workforce, to deliver an aligned early childhood education and care framework?

How could government maximise benefit to children from money spent providing early childhood development and related services in the ACT?

How could early childhood development services be better coordinated?



GETTING INVOLVED

The Future of Education community conversation invites comment about how the ACT can build on its strengths in school education to tackle some emerging challenges. The goal is to achieve an education system that sets all children up for a good life.

A key component of the ACT's Future of Education is how child development and education is supported in the early years, and a separate Early Childhood Strategy will give this issue the necessary focus.

The Government has committed to undertaking this extensive process throughout 2017, reaching beyond those who usually get to have a say. A range of resources and methods are being used to encourage and support wide participation.

Share your views:

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