



The Health and Happiness of our Children

A new approach for the Early Years

Labor's Discussion Paper
for an integrated approach
to the early years

November 2010

The Health and Happiness of our Children: A New Approach for the Early Years

Executive Summary

There is today overwhelming evidence that physical, emotional and cognitive development between birth and eight years occurs at a greater rate than at any other period of life. The quality of nutrition, care and relationships, beginning in the womb, and through these early years of life have the most significant impact on a person's future wellbeing and therefore government policy, by way of assistance and intervention, will have the most significant impact on a child's future.

The Western Australian Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (the Telethon Institute) has studied the children of this State for many years. While the overall health and happiness of Western Australia's children is encouraging, the Telethon Institute's findings show a significant and growing number of children are doing poorly. This is supported by evidence of the increasing incidence of mental illness, as well as aggression and obesity. More and more children are also commencing school with poor verbal and social skills, as well as exhibiting significant increases in behavioural problems.

Since 2009 the Western Australian State Parliament has released three reports that have all recommended the integration of early childhood services to give greater priority to the early years of a child's life and thereby ensure the best possible start in life for Western Australia's children. As well as benefitting the individual and the wider society experts agree that investing in early childhood results in tangible economic benefits. These include reducing demand for on-going health services as well as the need for additional educational assistance to remediate children commencing school who are not school ready, or have developmental or behavioural deficits that have not been addressed. Additionally, there are long term reductions in the costs that go with combating such things as mental illness, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse and unemployment.

In April 2010 all members of Parliament received a letter from Professor Fiona Stanley, Director, Telethon Institute and Michelle Scott, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA. The letter called for children to be made a far greater priority, for investment in best practice programs which will make the most significant impact on a child's life and for the establishment of one agency dedicated to early childhood. Clinical Professor Trevor Parry, Chair of National Investment for the Early Years WA also wrote to all members of Parliament in May 2010 recommending the establishment of an Independent Office of Early Childhood which would integrate services in early childhood.

This paper outlines the significance of the early years of a child's life, the concerns being expressed about the health and welfare of children in Western Australia today, considers whether current government policy is adequate and briefly outlines models for a more integrated approach to early childhood.

Western Australia is in a unique position to take a leading role in the provision and design of early childhood services as the home of the world class Telethon Institute. Active leadership and commitment by government would enhance Perth's position as a centre of excellence at the international level. We would all share the benefits by ensuring more children have a fairer start in life and the chance to make their way to become responsible young people and adults.

This discussion paper aims to raise public awareness of this important issue with the intention of creating and implementing a new approach for the early years of Western Australian children.

This paper was written for WA Labor by Hon Linda Savage MLC, Member for East Metropolitan Region.

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A New Approach for the Early Years

Introduction

There is today overwhelming evidence that physical, emotional and cognitive development between birth and eight years occurs at a greater rate than at any other period of human life. For children, what we know intuitively is confirmed by research, and that is the best chance for a child's development and long term wellbeing comes from having a safe and nurturing environment with an adult who is consistently caring. Conversely, no one disputes that poverty and family dysfunction are likely to diminish a child's potential.

Just as adequate nutrition is pivotal to a child's physical development, the quality of the relationships and the environment which a child experiences are essential for neurological and social development. It is now understood that the early years affect the development of a child's brain and have a life-long impact.

It is in these early years therefore that government policy, by way of assistance and intervention can have the most significant impact on a child's future.

The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research ("the Telethon Institute") has studied the children of Western Australia for many years. A number of its findings are disturbing. Despite the prosperity of Western Australia and the programs and policies that are in place, a significant and growing number of children are doing poorly. These findings are evidenced by the increasing incidence of mental illness, as well as aggression and obesity. Alarmingly more and more children are also commencing school with poor verbal and social skills, as well as exhibiting significant increases in behavioural problems.

At the same time, the Western Australian economy is leading the nation's recovery from the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. In 2009-10, Western Australia recorded an \$831 million surplus. The Western Australian economy is projected to grow by more than 16 per cent within the next four years. The 2010 - 11 State Budget noted that:

"Growth is then expected to accelerate to 4.5% in 2010-11 and 4.75% in 2011-12, above the long-run average rate of growth of 4.1%."¹

The State's peak business organisation, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in its quarterly snapshot in July 2010 said:

"As the economy continues to power up, economic growth this financial year will increase by a further 4.5 per cent with all sectors to play an important role. As a result, the economy will be stronger, and continue to rise steadily over the next few years, with growth reaching 6¼ per cent in 2012-13."²

There are lessons to be learnt from the previous economic boom in Western Australia. Failure by government to make the decisions now on how we ensure the very best outcomes for all Western Australian children is more than just a wasted opportunity for the present; future generations will suffer the consequences.

In response to the wealth of knowledge we now have about pediatric health and well being and the growing concern being voiced about children in Western Australia, this paper will outline the particular

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significance of the early years of a child's life, the concerns being expressed about the health and welfare of children in Western Australia today, and finally suggest a new approach.

The First Eight Years

We now know that it is in the earliest years of life, beginning in the womb, that the quality of nutrition, care and relationships has the most significant impact on a person's future wellbeing. Even before birth the importance of folic acid during pregnancy and a healthy lifestyle by the mother affects a child's future health and welfare. Professor Fiona Stanley, Director of the Telethon Institute and an international authority has said:

“For healthy children, we need healthy mothers, as their nutrition and lifestyle will affect how that baby grows in the womb and their risk of developing a range of chronic conditions later in life.”³

Adequate nutrition is essential for a child's physical development, health and educational outcomes.⁴ It is now understood that an infant's brain develops over the early months and years of its life as it interacts with the environment and those who care for it, and that this has a life-long impact.

‘The evidence all paints the same picture. It is the early years that are the most significant.’

“The early years are a time when the brain undergoes its most rapid period of development, laying down the ‘hard-wiring’ that will affect that individual for life.”⁵

Just how significant the early years are for future mental health was highlighted recently by Dr Steven Patchett, then Executive Director, Mental Health, Department of Health, when he gave evidence to the Legislative Assembly's Education and Health Standing Committee on 25 August 2009, telling the inquiry that:

“...there is very good evidence that we are intervening in mental illness at the wrong stage of life. There is really good evidence now that we should be concentrating mostly on infants- not even children-; on infants. The kind of traumas they may suffer – broken families, and sexual, physical and emotional abuse – leave a very deep mark on the psyche at an early stage. Increasingly this is the way the world is heading.”⁶

This evidence is consistent with findings that suggest early nurturing and experience of personal warmth have long lasting positive effects on mental health well into adulthood.⁷

The evidence all paints the same picture. It is the early years that are the most significant. For all children therefore, but particularly for disadvantaged and those identified as being at risk, early intervention can positively, even profoundly change the course of a child's life by reducing for example long term chronic health problems, mental illness and poor educational outcomes.

Western Australia's Children

While overall the health and happiness of Western Australia's children is encouraging, the findings of the Telethon Institute echo the Department of Health's submission to the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee's 2009 “Inquiry into the Adequacy of Services to Meet the Developmental needs of Western Australia's Children”, that:

“There are increasing proportions of children and young people with complex diseases such as asthma, diabetes, overweight and obesity, increasing levels of behavioural, developmental, mental health and social problems, along with significant disparities between Indigenous and non- Indigenous children.”⁸

Indigenous children, for example those in remote communities, may face added challenges if English is not their first language.

The 2008 Health and Wellbeing of Children survey estimated that approximately 90,000 Western Australian children aged between five and eight years are overweight, and approximately 27,000 are obese.⁹

At the July 2010 Youth Affairs Council of Western Australian Mental Health Forum, psychiatrist and Australian of the Year Dr Patrick McGorry spoke of the increasing incidence of mental illness that children and young people are experiencing, including increasing rates of suicide.¹⁰

It is both alarming and shocking that despite the fact that Perth is the home of the Telethon Institute, an internationally acknowledged leader in maternal and child health, children in Western Australia now do more poorly than children in other Australian states,¹¹ and indigenous children in WA are more disadvantaged than indigenous children in other parts of Australia.¹²

Failure to Invest in our Children - The Economic Cost to us All

In WA the annual number of births has increased by more than 20 per cent in the past five years. Yet Australia's investment in young children has been amongst the lowest of all OECD countries,¹³ and it is therefore not surprising that Australia is ranked 23rd out of 25 participating countries in meeting minimum standard benchmarks for childhood services.¹⁴

'Australia is ranked 23rd out of 25 participating countries in meeting minimum standard benchmarks for childhood services.'

Experts agree that investing in early childhood results in tangible economic benefits. Economic analysis conducted by Nobel Laureate and Economist Dr James Heckman and colleagues found that a dollar invested in early childhood (0–6 years) yields three times as much as for school aged children (6–18 years) and eight times as much as for adult education (over 18 years).¹⁵ The savings include reducing demands for ongoing health services and additional educational assistance to remediate children commencing school who are not school ready, or have developmental or behavioural deficits that have not been addressed. Additionally, there are reductions in the cost to the individual personally and society more widely that go with combating the currently increasing incidences of mental illness, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse and unemployment.¹⁶

Lack of Resources and Fragmentation of Services

As outlined above we have an excellent base of knowledge about the state of our children's health and what is required to improve and sustain it. Further, there are many programs currently in place aimed at early intervention and supporting families which are delivered by a range of government and non-government agencies.

Yet funding in Western Australia for even basic services such as adequate numbers of child health nurses has failed to keep pace with population growth, let alone address the range of complex health and developmental concerns that have been identified and that require early intervention. Western Australia for example currently needs at least 105 more community child health nurses and 135 more school health nurses to even keep pace with current demand.¹⁷

Concerns however go beyond just a lack of resources and point to a current policy approach that is fragmented and lacks co-ordination.

Commissioner Michelle Scott has argued:

“We need to use our existing resources better and stop ad hoc practices and poor decision making. We need to pool government and community resources and invest in best practice programs – which the research tells us will make the most significant impact on a child’s life.”¹⁸

In mid 2009 a group of directors and CEOs from 15 major early childhood peak bodies, stakeholders and professional associations wrote to the Premier and Minister for Education arguing for a whole of government response to early childhood health, education and care.¹⁹ Non-government agencies such as these are on the frontline providing services. Their experience and depth of expertise is crucial and their views authoritative.

Other agencies working at the coalface have also raised concerns about the fragmented approach to issues affecting young children. Following the release of figures showing more than 350 children under 10 have been involved in burglaries, assaults and car theft in 2009, a figure said by police to be the tip of the iceberg, Superintendent Michael Emmanuel, of the WA Police Community Engagement Division was quoted as saying:

“...the only way we’re going to fix the problem is if government agencies come together to work with children and their families to provide appropriate professional interventions.”²⁰

How to Respond to the Needs of Children in the Early Years

In April 2009 the Department for Communities released a discussion paper, “Integrated Service Development – A framework for children and family services”. Community feedback was invited in relation to the delivery of integrated children and family services in Western Australia with a deadline for submissions of 8 June 2009. It appears however that no follow up report is to be released.²¹

Currently there is a committee of senior departmental staff which meets from key government departments to put together strategy for early childhood. The need for a formal coordinated approach would appear to be receiving consideration. In evidence to the Estimates and Financial Operations Subcommittee Mr Eddie Bartnik, then Acting Director General, Department for Communities said:

“Particularly at the moment with the COAG reforms around early childhood, the state does need to have one lead policy agency and one lead regulator because particularly the regulation, which was done partly by the commonwealth and by a variety of state government arms, all need to be brought into one single system.”²²

Since 2009 the Western Australian State Parliament has released three reports. All have recommended the integration of early childhood services:

1. Education and Health Standing Committee, “Healthy Child – Healthy State: Improving Western Australia’s Child Health Screening Programs”, Report No.2/21 May 2009:

“That the Government continue to pursue the benefits of having one Minister with portfolio responsibility for early childhood education and development.” (chapter 10, p99, Recommendation 32)

2. Community Development and Justice Standing Committee, “Inquiry into the Adequacy of Services to meet the Developmental Needs of Western Australia’s Children”, Report No.1/13 August 2009:

“The Committee strongly recommends that the Government develop a whole-of-government perspective with respect to early childhood and places all relevant health, care, education and parent support programs under the banner of Early Development within one Ministerial portfolio; with the exception of the statutory intervention services of Department of Child Protection.” (chapter 6, p80, Recommendation 4)

3. Education and Health Standing Committee, “Invest Now or Pay Later: Securing the future of Western Australia’s Children”, Report No.5/11 March 2010:

The Chairman Dr Janet Woollard, MLA urged the Government to appoint a Minister for Early Childhood (pxii) and the report recommended that “In the absence of a single early years’ agency, the Departments of Health, Education, Communities and Child Protection, and the Disability Services Commission should provide an annual report to Parliament on children’s health and wellbeing in Western Australia.” (chapter 3, p57, Recommendation 10).

In April 2010 all members of Parliament received a letter from Professor Fiona Stanley, Director, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research and Michelle Scott, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA. The letter called on all parliamentarians to give children far greater priority and to invest in best practice programs which the research shows will make the most significant impact on a child’s life. In particular they called for the establishment of an Early Years’ Commission or Office, reporting directly to a Minister and sitting outside of any existing Department. This body would take responsibility for community health, early childhood education, childcare and parenting programs, as well as health. Clinical Professor Trevor Parry, recipient of the 2010 WA Citizen of the Year Award (Children and Young People Lifetime Achievement Award) also wrote to all members of Parliament in May 2010 recommending the establishment of an Independent Office of Early Childhood. Such an office would, he said, reflect the consensus about the importance of the early years of a child’s life in determining their future health, learning and behaviour. In his letter dated 19 May 2010 Professor Parry noted that despite writing, along with other peak bodies and community agencies, there has been no response from the Premier or Ministers.

The momentum continues to grow for an integrated approach. The Western Australian Council of Social Services (WACOSS) released a discussion paper in August 2010, “Early Years Reform: Working Together to Achieve Outcomes”.²³ In their paper, they state WACOSS has advocated for a number of years for an Office of Early Childhood, bringing together a wide range of government and non-government activities including health, parenting support programs, playgroups, childcare and early childhood education.

Possible Models for an Integrated Approach for the Early Years

Professor Fiona Stanley and Commissioner for Children and Young People Michelle Scott’s preferred model would include a Minister for Early Childhood with departmental responsibility.²⁴ The department would bring together all services and policies for children 0 to eight years old and be independent of the existing Health, Education and Community Services departments. An Office of Early Childhood would need to be established and would report directly to the Minister for Early Childhood and drive policy based on peer reviewed research; provide a central and coordinating function for all programs; provide a central point for integration of Commonwealth, State and non-government programs to maximise outcomes and minimise overlap and waste, and evaluate and monitor programs. There would, they argue, need to be Governmental commitment and resources to developing and instituting a 10 year plan, and the establishment of a monitoring framework for all Western Australian children that would report every two years.

In the WACOSS model, rather than reporting to a Minister and being a government department, an Office of Early Childhood would be an independent statutory body. WACOSS suggest the Office be responsible for developing a set of agreed outcomes for children across agencies, which would be measured at a local level every two to three years to monitor the progress of communities in caring for children. It would identify the best research and evidence for what works for young children and families, and function as a coordination point for industry, the not-for-profit sector and government, providing much needed advice and support to those wanting to invest in early years' projects. With this in place, WACOSS say service delivery to and by the early childhood sector would be streamlined, bringing cohesion, coordination and improved economic efficiencies.

'Victoria first appointed a Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development in 2007.'

Victoria first appointed a Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development in 2007. The Office for Children and Early Childhood Development ("OCECD") coordinates licensed children's services, child health nurse services, supported playgroups, parenting services, occasional childcare, community kindergartens and early childhood intervention services for children with a disability or developmental delay. All universal programs have been transferred to OCECD (except those relating to statutory intervention). The OCECD reports regularly against benchmarks for children's well-being.

Similarly in South Australia there is a Minister for Early Childhood Development. The commitment to making early childhood development the core business of the respective departments for Health, Education, Disability Services and Family Support Services has seen common badging of all of the services and has been complemented by co-locating the services. In addition, in a concerted effort to break down professional barriers, the South Australian government has invested in developing a shared set of common skills to be part of the curriculum for training the respective professionals. The building block of the delivery of early childhood services in South Australia is the child health nurse. Universal home visits by child health nurses to every newborn are supplemented with sustained home visiting by child health nurses for "at risk" babies for the first two years of the child's life. A Cabinet sub-committee of all Ministers with agencies delivering early childhood development programs ensures coordinated oversight of service integration.

Overseas models

In Manitoba in Canada, the Healthy Child Manitoba Act 2007 has resulted in a strategy involving a network of programs for children, youth and families. The focus is on researching and identifying best practice and models for long term, cross-departmental strategy to support child and adolescent development and then adapting it to Manitoba. It is led by the Ministers of the Healthy Child Committee of Cabinet and works in partnerships with community based organisations. A fundamental component of the program is 'BABY FIRST'. This is a universal program where a public health nurse meets with expectant or new parents, identifies their strengths and needs and then all decide together on the level of support needed. Meetings with the family continue on a regular basis until the child is three. These visits are undertaken by 'home visitors' who can identify issues, provide advice and referral to services and assistance commensurate to the needs of the family.

In England a recent NHS commissioned study by Sir Ian Kennedy, concluded that the portion of the health budget that is spent on children should be removed from the general health budget and those services with children at their core be integrated.²⁵

Current Situation in Western Australia

In Western Australia to date the Barnett Government has been silent on the models recommended by Professor Trevor Parry, Professor Fiona Stanley, Commissioner Michelle Scott or community organisations such as Wanslea Family Services, Ngala and Gowrie Community Services and WACOSS.

‘In Western Australia to date the Barnett Government has been silent..’

The three key Ministers with responsibility for delivery of early childhood services in health, education and parenting and children’s services appear to be at odds about which direction, if indeed any new direction is needed. While the Minister for Health, Dr Kim Hames has been reported as considering a single agency²⁶ and the Minister for Education, Dr Elizabeth Constable has indicated that consideration is being given to integrated services in early childhood,²⁷ the Minister for Child Protection and Community Services, the Hon Robyn McSweeney does not appear to support an Office of Early Childhood as proposed by Professor Fiona Stanley, Michelle Scott and Professor Trevor Parry.²⁸

Notwithstanding this, there are existing programs in some Western Australian schools which confirm the success of a more integrated approach involving the wider community and non-government agencies.

The Challis Early Childhood Education Centre²⁹ (Challis ECEC), located in Armadale is one such school. As part of the existing services Challis ECEC supports the health and wellbeing of its children through the provision of: a breakfast club; a bus to collect children where parents have no available transport; a speech therapist provided through Therapy Focus; a part time social worker; a culturally appropriate playgroup; grief counselling; and a family support officer who also does home visiting. Challis ECEC has secured the services of a doctor on site for one day a week who undertakes health screening on all the children. Challis ECEC works in strong partnership with the Department of Education and a number of non-government organisations such as Therapy Focus, Parkerville Children’s Home Inc, and Foodbank.

Conclusion

The compelling nature of the research in relation to the significance of the first eight years of life, combined with the current situation of children in Western Australia should lead us to reconsider the assumptions that have informed policy to date.

The evidence is unequivocal, it is in the early years that government policy and intervention can make the greatest difference. The three reports by the State Parliament since May 2009 have all raised numerous concerns about children, concerns echoed by experts such as Professor Fiona Stanley, Commissioner for Children and Young People Michelle Scott, Clinical Professor Trevor Parry and Dawson Ruhl on behalf of Carewest, Child Australia, ECA WA Branch, Gowrie Community Services, Ngala, Playgroup WA, Wanslea Family Services and the YMCA Perth.³⁰

Their clear preference is for an Office for Early Childhood with a dedicated Minister for Early Childhood, properly resourced and with the capacity to set long term policy goals, which would help ensure that children get the best possible start in life.

Experience shows that any investment must not just include government agencies, but also the non government sectors as well, and in such a way that they can properly remunerate the well qualified and experienced staff that deliver programs and services at the front line.

‘More children would have a better start in life and a chance to make their way - it is hard to imagine what the role of government is, if it is not to do its best to ensure all children get that opportunity.’

Western Australia is in a unique position to take a leading role in the provision and design of early childhood services as the home of the world class Telethon Institute for Child Health Research. Equally unique in Australia in 2010 is this state's economic capacity to deliver this change now. The case for change has been made by well respected researchers and by service deliverers on the ground and the evidence is clear about the benefit of this investment. Active leadership and commitment by government would enhance Perth's position as a centre of excellence at the international level.

We would all share the benefits. More children would have a better start in life and a chance to make their way - it is hard to imagine what the role of government is, if it is not to do its best to ensure all children get that opportunity.

This paper was written for WA Labor by Hon Linda Savage MLC, Member for East Metropolitan Region. For additional copies of the paper call 9477 3855 or go to www.loop.wa.gov.au

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Finding 5

Western Australia's performance is below the national average on a range of child health indicators. This includes a higher rate of teenage births; lower immunisation coverage; a greater proportion of children who are overweight or obese; fewer children achieving literacy and numeracy benchmarks; and greater proportions of children who are developmentally vulnerable on the language and cognitive domain, and the physical health and wellbeing domain of the Australian Early Development Index.

12. Ibid

Finding 6

Western Australia performs below the national average for Indigenous child health on a range of indicators. This includes a higher rate of children born of low birth weight, lower immunisation coverage, a higher rate of teenage births, a higher rate of deaths from injury, and fewer children achieving literacy and numeracy benchmarks.

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