

18th May 2023

The Hon Julia Gillard AC
Royal Commissioner
SA Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Dear Commissioner

Submission to the Royal Commission: Integrated ECEC can improve outcomes for South Australian children.

The Benevolent Society has a long history of working with children and families in the first 1000 days. We provide child, youth, and family services in South Australia, New South Wales, and Queensland. Our practice wisdom frames how we advocate for people in need and guides our social change priorities. We are experts in the early years, providing a range of services from targeted intensive family preservation through **Resilient Families** to universal integrated **Early Years Places**. These services speak to and inform our social change work, while our social change activities shape and respond to the wider world we operate in.

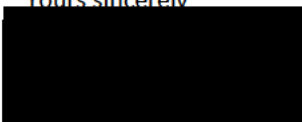
Most recently The Benevolent Society and Social Outcomes were thrilled to launch a national **Early Years Impact Measurement Framework**, which measures the long-term social and economic value of early childhood integrated support services. Good data provides the evidence for good decisions. The Benevolent Society is committed to actively expanding this research, to realise the benefit of consistent longitudinal data that can support more robust analyses of integrated early childhood support. Practice-led evidence is vital to inform decision-making at community and systems levels and I would be very pleased to share our learnings from this work with you.

The Interim Report has rightly recognised that being engaged in quality early learning prior to school is an essential foundation for children. Research clearly shows children do better with at least two years of quality early childhood education and care. We know when children start behind, they tend to stay behind. So, by ensuring two years of high-quality early learning education before school, the South Australian Government will improve child outcomes – particularly for children from low-income families.

The final report should now look to prioritise integrated ECEC services for South Australian families in the first 1000 days. Simply attending early childhood education is not enough to improve outcomes, the next step is aligning early years care with targeted health, development, parenting and social supports. The first 1000 days deeply impact a child's future health, development, learning and wellbeing. Yet services are fragmented with agencies operating in silos - this makes it hard for families to get support early before problems get to a crisis point. The recent Alexander Review (2022) into child protection showed South Australia spends the least of all states and territories on early intervention and intensive family support, and has some of the highest rates of child removal. In our experience integrated ECEC can change this providing soft entry points into targeted, wraparound supports. For this reason, we strongly believe they should be a core priority of the final report.

I would welcome the opportunity to brief you in more detail about our experience in integrating services for the early years.

Yours sincerely



Lin Hatfield Dodds
Chief Executive Officer

The Benevolent Society Early Years Places

The Benevolent Society Early Years Places engages and retains at risk families with effective parenting, infant and social supports. Children and their families often need broader supports than single programs can provide. This is why the Early Years Places are designed to wrap around families with targeted supports that can meet a range of social, emotional, and economic needs.

Extraordinary preventive work can be done where integrated early years services exist.

What happens early in a child's life matters. The first five years deeply impact a child's future health, development, learning and wellbeing¹. Integrated service offerings help to overcome the challenge of a disparate hard to navigate service system. Evidence shows the wellbeing of children improves when early childhood interventions can be wrapped around them and their families². This benefit has been evident in the outcomes achieved in The Benevolent Society integrated Early Years Places, which are innovative one-stop shops that support the health, development, wellbeing, and safety of young families.

The Benevolent Society were the first providers of integrated early childhood care in Queensland.

These Early Years Places currently support more than 4,400 young children and their families every year, including many families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds. Their strength comes from an ability to engage vulnerable families, identify developmental and family risks early, and then retain families long enough for supports to have impact. This is done through the employment of a multidisciplinary staff across a range of universal and targeted early child development and support services, while also working in partnership with other non-government service providers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and the Queensland Government. Children walk through the doors to access a range of services that can be tailored for each family in a non-stigmatising and family friendly way.



Sarah's Story*³

30-year-old Sarah is in a de facto relationship and has a daughter, Michelle (3 years old) and a son, Jack (5 years old). They live in social housing. Both the children and their father identify as being of Aboriginal descent. Michelle and Jack are both experiencing developmental delays. Sarah

left school in Year 9 and does not currently have a paying job. She has a long history of experiencing

domestic family violence in the home, which has been regularly observed by her children. She wanted to separate from her partner but has struggled to navigate that process. Her partner controls the money, her phone and her access to family and friends. Sarah spends most of her time at home and is very cautious of people she doesn't know.

Sarah found out about The Benevolent Society Early Years Program when her doctor at the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health service suggested she make contact. After calling the service, Sarah was invited to bring Jack and Michelle to the Explorers Playgroup which is specifically designed for children experiencing developmental delays. Michelle and Jack love playing with the other kids and Sarah has felt great relief that she can talk about her parenting experiences with other parents going through similar challenges – suddenly she doesn't feel so different. It feels like a safe place she can come to where there is no judgement, just friends and staff who support her.

Sarah quickly realises the staff are an amazing resource– with an occupational therapist, a speech pathologist and a child and family practitioner all under the same roof. And the support continues, with the Early Years Place providing ongoing targeted support to help Sarah and her children stay on track. In addition to regular supervision provided to all staff, the Team Leader in charge of Sarah's case actively seeks the views from both Sarah and staff about how well the interventions are working and what they could do differently next time. This includes support seeking affordable housing, help finding a school that can best support Michelle's needs and then help to get Sarah a reduction in school fees. **Over time, Sarah and her children experience secure housing, improved community connection and Michelle successfully transitions to school.**

¹ Council of Australian Governments (2009). *Investing in the early years—a national early childhood development strategy: an initiative of the Council of Australian Governments*. Council of Australian Governments

² Molloy C, O'Connor M, Guo S, et al. (2019) *Potential of 'stacking early childhood interventions to reduce inequalities in learning outcomes*. J Epidemiol Community Health

³ Sarah's Story is a condensed version of a case study developed as part of The Benevolent Society and Social Outcomes Impact Report on its Queensland Early Years Places – it represents a collection of experiences by families who engage with the EYP. The names do not depict any specific EYP family.

Why Early Years Places Work

It is often the children and families who most need services that are more likely to miss out.

Children living in disadvantaged communities are least likely to attend playgroups: 1 in 7 compared with 1 in 4 of those in more advantaged communities⁴. Children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are also less likely to attend playgroups, as are children from non-English speaking backgrounds. And when children with an Aboriginal background don't attend playgroups they are almost twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry, compared to those who attend⁵. Unfortunately, even when children attend early childhood education the impact can be limited if their families cannot access additional, targeted health and development parenting and social supports⁶. This is why engagement sits at the core of these Early Years Places - programs are designed and implemented with, and for, the community in which they operate and with other non-government service providers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and the Queensland Government.

They align with the current evidence base on what should work in early childhood systems.

These Early Years Places are both consistent with, and build upon, the theoretical evidence base that has described what makes a strong, fully integrated, place-based support system for socially excluded families. Their strength comes from an ability to engage vulnerable families, identify developmental and family risks early, and then retain families long enough for supports to have impact.

They focus on creating a bridge between informal and formal assistance.

These are one-stop shops to support the health, development, wellbeing, and safety of families who have young children aged up to eight years. Families walk through the doors to access a range of services, including child health checks, immunisation services, or just to enjoy a playgroup with their child. Once through the door, staff have the capacity to ramp up and target intervention for a range of concerns that the family may bring with them.

Early Years Places help families overcome structural, relational, and family barriers to engagement.

The Benevolent Society has found Early Years Places provide the key ingredients needed to engage vulnerable families:

- Investment in building trust and strong relationships with, and between, clients in a safe, culturally relevant, and welcoming environment with a universal service offering.
- Commitment to hiring expert staff with the relevant training, placing those staff in multiple settings, and coordinating targeted supports where required.
- Broad, strong, collaborative service partnerships providing a diverse and holistic offering of both universal and targeted activities and supports.
- Governance and practice frameworks providing a strong enabling environment.

The Benevolent Society has also discovered over time that the three key strengths of the Early Years Places lie in their ability to:

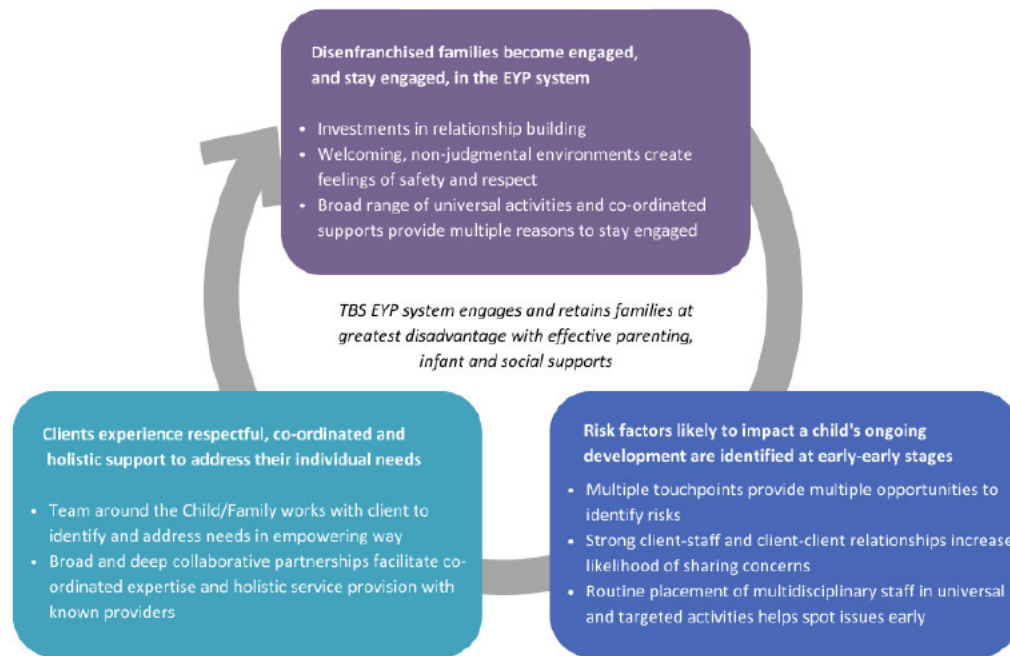
- Engage vulnerable families (high engagement rates);
- Identify developmental and family support risks at an early stage (early identification); and
- Retain families within the system for long enough that the supports have the desired impact (high uptake rates of identified supports).

⁴ AEDC Research Snapshot (2020) *The relationship between early childhood education and care and children's development*.

⁵ Sincovich, A., Harman-Smith, Y., & Brinkman, S. (2019). *The reach of playgroups and their benefit for children across Australia: A comparison of 2012, 2015, and 2018 AEDC data*. Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia.

⁶ Moore, TG (2019), *Early childhood, family support and health care services: An evidence review*, Prepared for the City of Port Phillip, Melbourne Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health

Figure 1: Early Years Places approach to engaging and retaining families at greatest disadvantage.



The Next Steps

Early research by our partners at Social Outcomes has shown through a breakeven analysis that it only takes one child in a cohort to 'do well' for the benefits to exceed the costs.

The key benefit supporting the breakeven analysis is the assumed reduction in predicted early school leaving rates derived from engagement with The Benevolent Society Early Years Places developmental and family supports. By reducing early school-leaving the risk of lifetime unemployment and associated social costs is also reduced. We have started building this evidence by establishing there is a breakeven point - that it only takes one child for the benefits to exceed the costs.

But to realise their full impact and scale them up effectively, filling evidence gaps must also be a priority.

We know Integrated support for children and their families work. The literature is full of reasons why integrated early childhood systems are better than fragmented service systems. However, The Benevolent Society's recent [Impact Measurement Framework and Report](#) with Social Outcomes revealed the evidence-base is surprisingly without robust data. Right now, each organisation designs the impact measures of their integrated services however they see fit. Agreeing on a set of consistent impact measurement practices and learnings would change this, strengthening the evidence base. Measuring the social and economic value of integrated childhood supports in Australia is challenging – but if we are to realise the full impact of these initiatives and scale them up effectively, filling the evidence gaps must be a priority.

For more detail on the social impact read the full [Impact Measurement Framework and Report](#).