



Children's Centres

for Early Childhood
Development and Parenting

Attention: The Hon Julia Gillard AC | Commissioner

Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting: a case for reinvestment

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our submission as experienced leaders in service provision for families with young children including those in the first 1000 days.

We write as a group of Directors and leaders currently responsible for delivering care, education, health, community and family support services for families and their young children via Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting (Children's Centres). Children's Centres were established in 2005, by the Department for Education. We are tasked with providing a universally layered approach with targeted additional resourcing for children and families requiring extra support to ensure equitable access (according to the principle of progressive universalism). This is an approach that was noted in the recently released Interim Report as being strongly supported by the Expert Advisory Committee.

We welcome the Commissioner's focus particularly on equity and the opportunity to refocus a system orientation towards genuine early intervention that reaches and supports those who are most in need.

It has been well established that the home environment, and particularly the parent child interactions within this environment, are primary determinants of a child's development in the early years in establishing a positive trajectory for health, education, employment and wellbeing outcomes that are lifelong. It is also well understood that the enrichment of a child's home environment and quality of parenting interactions can be improved with assistance. The Interim Report recently released acknowledges, however, that the more risk factors that exist within a family, the more likely families will experience numerous barriers to accessing early childhood services.

This understanding absolutely reflects our collective experiences and highlights the critical importance of providing place-based community level approaches that can provide coherently integrated services that reach the families experiencing the greatest disadvantage.

The ability to identify and work effectively in overcoming the service barriers that inhibit families' successful participation in early childhood services requires sophisticated understandings of child development and family functioning from a critical and culturally responsive perspective in addition to in depth knowledge of the cumulative impacts of disadvantage, and the many ways in which this presents in the lives of children and families. Developing well-functioning interdisciplinary services that are able to provide the right support in the right form at the right time for any individual family, requires significant investment of resourcing and collaborative commitment across various South Australian and Federal government departments.

As noted in several other submissions to the Royal Commission, coordination of support for the most disadvantaged families is not systematically supported. It is unfunded and occurs often on an ad hoc basis where practitioners, agencies and education staff value its importance and make it happen by working above their paid capacity and without consistent tools or support.



Department for Education Children's Centres have been working with children and families initially with significant investment by the Department for Education (DfE) in areas such as infrastructure, professional learning, induction, staffing and partnerships across government agencies. This investment virtually ceased a number of years ago coinciding with a Machinery of Government, having since only received a very slight allocation through the DfE Early Learning Strategy in 2021 which enabled the development of an Outcomes framework but did not address other areas of desperately needed investment.

These changes also placed key positions and funding streams previously held by DfE across different government departments creating difficulty for families who are no longer considered eligible for shared case co-ordination or resourcing, but who require additional supports beyond what is available and possible in universal programs. Additionally some of those positions are now in the process of potentially being relocated out of Children's Centres entirely. This has created enormous pressure on individual staff within Children's Centres who continue to experience growing need and expectation to deliver parenting support and community based services which has in turn has impacted negatively on staff retention.

We believe that the existing children's centres have a significant role to play not only in supporting three year old preschool but also in supporting the first 1000 days of a child's life. This is the work we are already doing. These centres could add value to the 1000 places already specified by the Commission. Existing leaders and other staff could provide expertise and lived experience about this type of service provision in the South Australian context. What is required is reinvestment.

We argue that whilst Children's Centres are ideally placed as early childhood service hubs able to share best practice in successful parental involvement and support, the existing capacity of Children's Centres is stretched and the role of Children's Centres as leaders in Integrated work within South Australia needs careful consideration that should be seen as an opportunity for change from the current trajectory returning to the principle of progressive universalism, which is at the core of Children's Centres' philosophy. It is critical that families experiencing the greatest disadvantage, and the most barriers to accessing services, need access to trauma and attachment informed, culturally responsive early childhood support. Furthermore the provision of these services creates significant social return on investment.

We gratefully acknowledge the interim report recognizes the important potential of integrated services. As a group of leaders who have collectively been providing evidence informed community-based services in early childhood support for some time in South Australia we respectfully request opportunity for future consultation with specific recommendations we are able to put forward that will maximise opportunities for re-investment to existing services and are keen to share our collective knowledge with a broader sector that is facing an exciting time of considerable change and reform.

With many thanks for the opportunity to provide this submission

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