

Formal submission to Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Hon Julia Gillard AC

Royal Commissioner into Early Childhood Education and Care

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Dear Commissioner Gillard

Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

I am grateful for the opportunity to provide a response to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care.

I am a mother of three sons, a grandmother of two grandsons and two granddaughters. I have taught for the South Australia Education Department, the Autistic Childrens Association and operated my own Child Care Centre. I have worked in the federal government's Youth attainment and transition program as a Partnership Broker. I am currently on leave from the Department of Human Services as Community Development Coordinator, based in the Renmark Children's Centre. I feel professionally qualified to input into the commission and appreciate the opportunity to have my say. Thank you.

In the last four years I have worked extensively with the AEDC data for Renmark and looked at other areas as well as part of my role as Community Development Coordinator.

I do not think that institutionalizing three-year-olds is the answer to improving their attainment levels in the AEDC census data when they are five.

The best place for the child up to 2000 days is with its parents. The most important thing for this child is for it to form a strong attachment with its family and feel safe and loved in the family. Then the child will grow to be healthy and well.

The answer is to help the families learn to PLAY with their children and support them in their parenting and wellbeing. Much like HIPPY (Home Interaction Program for parents and Youngsters) funded by the Australian Government and delivered by local providers.

I have observed children attend programs I facilitated, at three years of age and under, drinking soft drink from a bottle, in filthy clothing, unable to speak and with other social and emotional concerns.

The way to support healthy learning and development for these children is to work with the families to interrupt the intergenerational cycle of abuse, neglect, and disadvantage.

In our work as Community Development Coordinators in Children's Centers we facilitate programs that reach the families who need support by collaborating with agencies locally. What is needed in the regions is more support for these agencies to do the work, most are under resourced. For example there is only one women's shelter for women affected by domestic violence for the whole of the Riverland. There is no mobile playgroup agency in the Riverland, or toy library.

There isn't enough social housing, families are living in over crowded houses, women stay in violent situations because they have nowhere to go. This obviously has a huge impact on the wellbeing of the children and how they perform on the AEDC census.

I have worked with children who may stay at three different homes in a week, one with grandmother one with dad one with mum, there may be up to six other children staying in the house. These children will be scored very differently on the AEDC rating for emotional wellbeing by the teacher than those who have been tucked up in bed at 7pm each night after a bedtime story!

Waiting times to see a doctor in the Riverland are up to 4 weeks, if you are a single parent with four children and no car that means all your children stay at home with you and this impacts their learning.

The 25% of people in the Riverland who are on social benefits or disability allowances is an interesting comparison to the 25% of children or are vulnerable or at risk on the AEDC census data.

The ECEC setting can provide a stimulating play space, rich in language and learning, children will thrive if they can adjust to this culture but if they are disadvantaged at home, they will always be behind. (According to research) The core purpose is to take the place of the parent or care giver who is the most important person in that child's life. At this age the child needs to have a strong attachment and secure environment in the home to grow well.

Staff can provide support with Foodbank food and clothing as necessary, assist families to access services and guidance as they ask or show a need. The center has a requirement to notify any issues of concern to the relevant department.

Some families' support needs are great, including how to use Centrelink, how to access services like allied health and manage a budget. Some families in domestic violence situations need ongoing counselling support to manage grief and loss and learn new ways to parent so that they don't repeat the mistakes their parents made. Parents recently released from incarceration need to learn how to live in a home of their own while parenting.

Many parents need to know how to assist their children to PLAY, as they haven't learnt themselves. The high rate of children who are showing up on the AEDC census as developmentally vulnerable or at risk in the areas of Emotional and Social are because they aren't PLAYING. They are doing screens. Many of them are not speaking well either because parents are not talking with them or playing/reading/singing with them.

Parents who are illiterate aren't sharing books with their children or singing with them and this is showing up in the number of children in the AEDC data who are vulnerable or at risk in the areas of language and cognitive skills.

In regional areas, such as the Riverland, transport is a huge barrier for families living on social security. The Children's Centre and/or play group or kindergym may be 3kms away from the homes where they live and to walk there and back is not an option when the temperature is in the high 30 degrees or in the winter when it is below 10 degrees. Programs I developed as community development coordinator were only well attended if I provided transport.

Families who don't know where they will be getting food from next week are not likely to be thinking about going to play group or kindergym.

"Communities for Children" a federal government funded program is delivered in South Australia through local agencies but is only across a small section of the state and could be increased to support a wider section of the community in need. It successfully engages with families and delivers programs to support parenting and early learning opportunities.

Locally I drilled down in our AEDC data and looked at the numbers to find that the percentages become (four or five) families in local schools. I am pretty sure that the 25 % of children who are

falling below in the AEDC data are going to prove to be the families who are struggling with social, emotional, violence, abuse, or mental health, poverty issues themselves. The community services are there to follow up these families from birth and keep in touch with them to make sure they are travelling ok. All the government agencies are there to support them. The resources need to be in place continuously and in a streamline manner. In regions they are lacking. If we work with these families to assist them in their parenting and well being we are going to change the lives for their children and interrupt the cycle going forward for the future.

The Children's Centre model, developed in South Australia where there are 47 centers with integrated occupational therapists, social workers, physiotherapists, community development workers and education departmental staff – teachers, early childhood care workers and childcare staff, together with visiting CaFHS nurses and other interagency staff is a perfect model. This needs to be strengthened, supported, and grown. Since the partnership with the department of Human Services two years ago, less instead of more support has been given to the Children's Centers and their fantastic work with engaging families and community.

The Children's Centre is the best model for families to access services and be guided to further explore more information and support in a one stop.

Mothers' groups, Mothers and Dads to be groups, playgroups, groups for children with special needs, training and learning sessions for families, information sessions, art and craft sessions for parents, cooking and home maker sessions, parenting skills sessions, child development sessions, first aid are all services and activities ECEC services can provide.

Currently ECEC staff are not well cared for or paid enough for the work they do. Staff need more flexible timetables and higher wages. Currently ECEC workers are paid less than check out operators at supermarkets.

Children's Centres include parents and caregivers in education and information to support well-being and attachment in the early years. The Occupational therapists and social workers are there to support families in this as are the Community Development coordinators, they do their best to work through barriers that prevent non-attendance.

There are not enough Child Care Centres in the Riverland for everyone who needs and wants to access them. In one centre alone there is a waiting list of 60. Staffing the centres is another issue, it is very difficult to find suitable well-trained staff and keep them.

In my experience working in a Children's Centre, social factors are the big issues. Some members of society feel judged and feel as though the centre activities aren't for them because they aren't the "in" group. Others have had poor experiences with education and won't or don't engage with the centre because of this. Some parents just cannot access the centre at all

because of the lack of a personal vehicle and walking to take their child there is out of the question when it 40 degrees or when it is 5 degrees. A lack of food has been another reason for non-attendance. Lack of clean clothing or nappy stress has also been a reason for non-attendance. If the family are living on social security benefits, they often don't have the funds to provide food or fresh clothing for the children to attend. Family violence has also been a reason for non-attendance, a parent who has suffered from an incident will hold their children at home with them, so she isn't seen out in public.

Encouraging year ten students to consider beginning a school-based apprenticeship is a great solution.

Pacific Islander people whose partners are working on fruit picking visas may be interested in studying at TAFE and becoming trained at Diploma level. This will make them skilled and ready for immigration as a family. I spent some time in Vanuatu and supported some of the staff at an international school to access learning through TAFE SA.

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