

## Why is Early Childhood Important?

*“I am your laughing, crying,  
possibility:  
I keep on coming as  
I did before,  
Hoping and hungering  
And with no visible  
means of support whatever.  
Naked need is  
all I offer:  
my extremity is  
your opportunity.”*

From ‘Child’ by Sydney Carter, 1955

### The changing context

Throughout the thirty member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) there is increasing concern about provision for early childhood outside the home. (Internationally, ‘early childhood’ is defined as the period from birth to eight years). There is no single cause for this heightened concern, rather a coalescing of forces and changes which are affecting our children. Principal of these are:

- greater emancipation of women
- efficient contraception
- a decline in the birth rate
- increasing numbers of women in the workforce
- high divorce rates
- recent research on early brain development
- the persistent and debilitating effects of poverty and the roots of crime
- conflicting value systems in a more fluid, post-modern, mobile world
- increasing influence of technology and the media
- globalisation of economies.

Within the OECD, Australia stands as a country with a secure, stable and robust economy (OECD, 2003a): an affluent and ‘high performing country’, yet one which has persistently spent at the lower end of proportional GDP on its services for children when compared with other member countries. (OECD, 2001, p.87)

### Rationales for investment

There are somewhat different rationales offered by governments for their increasing investment in early childhood, but the OECD offered the five most common and inter-related objectives as:

***“Facilitating the labour market participation of mothers with young children and the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities;***

***Supporting children and families ‘at risk’ while promoting equal opportunities to education and life-long learning;***

***Supporting environments which foster children's overall development and well-being;***

***Enhancing school readiness and children's later educational outcomes; and***

***Maintaining social integration and cohesion.***" (OECD, 2001, p.38)

Additionally, many countries are seeing 'pre-school' as an essential precursor to primary or grade school, with the nature of that experience becoming ever earlier and a formal curriculum ever more likely. All of the above factors are driving policy-makers to an unparalleled focus on the early years of life, and increasing the commitment of very substantial sums of public money and a real concern for high quality institutional provision.

Many countries, therefore, are examining the quality of their early childhood provision and connecting it more clearly with the variations in later school achievement and overall social and human capital. As discussed by Temple (2000), these last are notoriously difficult to define as the amount, style and ages of the provision of early childhood education and care vary from country to country and it is difficult to disaggregate care from both education and notions of social capital.

Moreover, the traditional divide between kindergarten/preschool 'teacher' and that of the long day-care 'carer' is beginning to break down. Both UNESCO and the OECD now use the term 'Early Childhood Education and Care' (ECEC) to cover the mix of provision and practice which exists for children from birth through to early primary education. Terms such as kindergarten, nursery school and pre-school mean very little outside the specific system in which they are embedded, since they encompass different ages and stages in different countries. Differences in emphasis may also be affected by different traditions and different levels of initial training.

In general, the age of entry into formal primary schooling is lowering, and in some countries (such as England) is now, in effect, often as low as four years. Parents can choose whether their child starts at age six or seven years in the Nordic countries; the evidence being that most parents choose the later age. Additionally, many countries are developing, or have developed 'light touch curricula': programmes designed for the very young which are thought to facilitate early literacy and appropriate social and intellectual skills, and which can usefully 'map on' to the later formal curriculum of primary school. This process is sometimes termed 'the schoolification' of the early years and its wisdom is hotly disputed by different experts in the field, notably in Sweden (UNESCO, 2002). There is already a 'light touch' curriculum in South Australia, operating in an advisory form from birth (SACSA, 2001).

## **Childhood**

Childhood is, of course, a social construct and what societies 'do' with their children and how they describe their versions of the desirable or appropriate attributes of childhood have varied from century to century and culture to culture. However, with the globalisation of economies, the power of commercial exploitation, the speed and persuasiveness of media contact everywhere, come features remarkably akin to homogeneity. Whether we like it or not, there is surprising commonality of experience, if not of focus. For instance, many of us share largely the same media experiences throughout the thirty countries of the OECD and increasingly our children are socialised by powerful agencies largely outside of our control. In some

cases it seems to embattled parents that the media appear to have more power in the process of bringing up children than the parents themselves.

Certain major themes constantly emerge from any review of the research literature on childhood. One: that in early childhood, learning is at 'flood-tide' and is particularly crucial during the first three or four years after birth, affecting the very architecture of the brain and our dispositions to think and act, thus building life-long habits of mind. Two: that attachment and consistency of warm, loving behaviour are the best bulwarks against dysfunctionality in adulthood. Three: that the effects of poverty on early childhood are universally noted as long-lasting and cripplingly debilitating: often eroding relationships, responsibility and creativity and any chance of future economic well-being. Other subsidiary but powerful recurring themes concern the relevant and iconic nature of play and games in early learning; the pivotal importance of language, especially the beginnings of literacy; the importance of appropriately matched stimulation, coupled with an awareness that children develop at different rates; and the vital nature of relationships and emotions in all learning.

What might one envisage as the best experience possible for a child born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

- To be born into a friendly, sensitive environment which is able to 'bathe' the child in good healthy practices, good food, language, love and a sense of belonging.
- To be born into a safe place where there is no fear, other than the low level risks of trying and exploring.
- To be born into a world rich in interesting sensations, people and children, science, aesthetics, music, friends and companions.
- To be born into a world where the possibilities are exciting, challenging and endless.
- To be born into a world where moral principles are commonly seen as important features of human life.

### **Social and economic disadvantage**

Numerous longitudinal, birth-to-adult cohort studies show the debilitating effects of poverty in a range of areas such as diet, health, education and crime. Many also clearly show the importance of early intervention for economically disadvantaged children: low socio-economic status (SES) is often taken as a clear indicator of need. Certainly there is a plethora of research which demonstrates that children from families of low SES tend to perform at a lower level throughout schooling. Many interventions have been designed to supplement or assist children from such backgrounds to build their intellectual and personal resources, so that they can perform better. Poverty is particularly marked in Australian indigenous communities. (OECD, 2001, p.150).

One particular high cost and high yield intervention directed at poverty and ethnic minorities in a multitude of guises has been that of 'Head Start', initiated by Ladybird Johnson in 1964. This has been a 'lode-star' for many other interventions throughout the world: targeting health, welfare, education, skill training and childcare services with varying success in the many states of the USA, for the last thirty years. In 2003 it enrolled more than 800,000 children from low income families. Over the years it has noted strong, positive effects on general performance in schooling and on language in particular - effects said to continue for at least twenty years. The debate over

whether early intervention works has been largely agreed in the affirmative, though one should be cautious about over-zealous interpretations of brain research acting as a firm guide to specific early educational protocols (Bruer, 1999; Coles, 2004).

The widespread credence given to the McCain and Mustard study (1999) and the reviews of Karoly et al (1998) were preceded by the work of Ball (1994) whose report probably galvanised the Labour Government in England to move into ambitious plans for early intervention. This last has been seen (and rightly so) as a major contributor to better later school achievement and to the eventual alleviation of child and adult poverty in England. It has undoubtedly also been successful as an aid in adult training and in assisting 'welfare to work' policies. The shifts in policy have been mirrored by similar shifts in Ministerial responsibility. ***“England and Sweden (in 1998) and Sweden (in 1996) transferred national responsibility for early childhood education and care (early years services and childcare for school-age children (school-age childcare services) from welfare to education departments.”*** (UNESCO, 2003).

South Australia has had almost two decades of assigned responsibility for education and childcare within the aegis of the Minister for Education and Children's Services. Commonly now, in many countries, including Australia, there appears to have been a growing view that children's early care and education should be the shared responsibility of both the state and the individual family. (OECD, 2001 p.40) Moreover, several studies in other countries show investment in children's learning and support from birth to be cost effective and better value for money than attempting to remedy problems later (O'Brien, 1990; Ball, 1994; Karoly et al, 1998; Bertram and Pascal, 2003).

## Family matters

There are many changes in family structures which have been well documented throughout the thirty OECD countries; in particular the almost universal decline in the birth rate, the growing incidence of divorce and the later age of women at first childbirth. The birth rate throughout Europe, the Nordic countries, North America and Australasia has declined substantially: now averaging approximately 1.7 children per family in South Australia, with Portugal as low as 1.46 and Italy 1.55 children per family (OECD, 2001 and 2003). The divorce rate is nearing 40% in Australia and the United Kingdom (ABS, 2002 and National Statistics, UK, 2003) and age at first childbirth is now approaching 30 years (29.7).

The long march of women towards greater social justice and greater equality between the sexes appears to have played a major part in these figures. Women now have choices which were denied them in the past: choices about marriage, family and work. In Australia the percentage of 'never-married' women tripled between 1976 and 1998 and is now approaching 25%. Fifteen per cent of all families are single parent families, with 26.6% of children now born to unmarried mothers (ABS, 2002). It was recently estimated that in Australia at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, almost a quarter of all women (22%) would not be married at 35 years of age (ABS, 2001). Somewhat similar figures exist in Europe and the Nordic countries: the evidence appears to indicate that Australian women, like many of their counterparts in other countries, are frequently making choices not to marry and/or not to have children (McDonald and Kippen, 2000). Marriage is no longer one of the only avenues to female success, security or happiness, despite the biological imperatives of child-rearing. The position of women is getting closer, therefore, to

that traditionally associated with men, and for many contemporary children this has become the age of 'the only, lonely child'.

In a variety of ways, families and perhaps our associated concepts of childhood, are changing. Efficient, simple methods of contraception are cheaply available, reliable and ever more easy to use. The tendency for professional women (particularly, but by no means uniquely) to delay childbirth, and the general entry of women into the work force have changed some of the ways we look at family responsibilities, especially that of child-rearing.

***“The increasing precariousness of employment among males and the growing instability of marriage also has encouraged women to participate in the labour market to ensure economic stability for their households. As a result, more women – and also more men – are facing dual and also conflicting employment and family responsibilities. In Finland, for example, over 60% of women with a 3-year-old child are employed (compared with 70% of all women aged 25 - 34), while in Australia, only 47% of women with a child under 3 work (compared with 64% of all women aged 25 – 34).”*** (OECD, 2001, p.25)

Despite slightly different work patterns in different counties, 'institutional' or organised childcare has become an important feature, perhaps the normal feature in everyday family life. However, one particular large scale study in selected states in the USA showed that if childcare provision is poor during the very early months of life (up to age nine months), there can be later negative effects still visible at three years of age. This National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD, 2000) study also demonstrated that the effects of inadequate parenting and poor family functioning are clearly offset if the childcare is of high quality. As a Canadian focus paper summarised:

***“The message is twofold. First, quality of childcare matters to virtually all child outcomes and no matter what the child’s situation or background. Second, good quality early childhood programs together with parental care at home is (sic) better than parental care on its own.”*** (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2003, p.2)

## **Brain development**

Magnetic resonance imagery (MRI) has been a major contributor to our knowledge about the human brain and how it develops. This technology measures the blood flow and can illustrate the actual activity of the brain when we are performing tasks, are at rest, or are in some life-threatening situation. It has been a diagnostic tool of the utmost importance and, among other things, has shown us much more about brain development during adverse and optimal circumstances.

However, there are somewhat contradictory views taken about the importance of this work and what it means for the carers and teachers of the very young. The influential report by McCain and Mustard (1999) referred to 'critical periods' for learning. The assumptions about these 'windows of opportunity' are very difficult to replicate and confirm or deny. While there is some evidence of critical periods in the brain development of animals other than humans, such as that of vision in domestic kittens, for example, there is little that is that specific to our children.

For instance, contrast the following views of two respected researchers:

***“It is the consensus of the participants that a ‘critical period’ exists during which the synapses of the dendrites are most ready for appropriate stimulation, be it through words, music, love, touch or caring. If these synapses are not so stimulated early, they may never develop.”*** (Wynder, 1998, p.166)

and

***“I suggest that the importance of timing lies not within a set of age parameters but rather in the match between experiences provided, the child’s developmental status, and the child’s need or readiness to learn a particular skill or concept.”*** (Bailey, 2002, p.293)

What we do know is that during the first three years or so of a child’s life, the brain is immensely ‘plastic’ and responsive. In the foetal stage the brain is building billions of brain cells. After birth some trillions of connections are gradually established and these form the structures or ‘maps’ that govern the coordination and transmission of information. The constant change in the networks and their sophistication is the direct result of contact and observation, of repetition and curiosity. Processes of ‘selective amplification’ occur in direct relationship to the frequency and intensity of stimulation by the environment. All of this is embedded in attachment, consistency, recency, mimicry; such that, in reality, all learning can be termed social, a reflection of those cumulative childhood experiences.

It is clear that neuron-synapse connections are produced in over abundance during the early post-natal period, and those concerned with the mapping of responses seem crucially linked to interactions between the child and his parents and carers. The characteristic way in which a close adult behaves will especially influence the child’s emotional behaviour. This seems implicated in helping establish the individual patterns of brain development, thus setting those ever-more-common avenues of expectation which begin to typify responses to the environment. We also know that if persistent stress occurs, either during the foetal or post-natal development, it is likely that two particular hormones, Serotonin and Nor-adrenalin, will be produced at above-normal levels. Such over-activity can then itself become a ‘typical’ process affecting both responses and behaviour regulation. Both hormones are impulse modulators whose levels in the brain can critically affect behaviour and the body’s ‘alarm system’ (Perry, 1997; Kotulak, 1998).

It is dangerous to think of early learning as being irredeemable. While it is of pivotal importance: while numerous studies show a high level of predictability between the behaviour of the three year old and the adult, we know that brain growth continues during adolescence and that learning continues throughout life, especially as the human being is a social animal. Higher order thinking protocols can be changed, though it is usually difficult to do this over a base of strong early childhood learning. However, in normal childhood, during the first three years, it appears that the foundations of language are securely laid down, as are the major parameters of the child’s attitudes and dispositions towards the outside world. The important thing to note is that, while plasticity and process are vitally necessary to brain development, variations in outcome are very large, as are the associated variations in rates of development.

There may also be significant gender differences in the brain which can account for some of this, as female brains are somewhat denser in grey matter. Boys and girls, women and men are often better at different things, though the differences within each group can be very large. Females have been observed, among other things, to

be better at: identifying matching items at speed, most language functions and certain aspects of 'multi-tasking'. Males tend to be better at gross motor movement and at mechanical and spatial skills. The point at issue is that, while there may be genetic predispositions that help with this, these tasks are over-laid with social meaning and reward very early on in the child's lifetime (Smith, 2001; Bailey, 2002).

It would appear that some children are more vulnerable to stress and some are more resilient. There is some evidence that they were born this way as investigations of stress tend to confirm such a view (Perry, 1993; Greenspan, 1997). While some stress is necessary for normal human functioning, and challenge often precedes repetition and mastery, excessive stress clearly damages functioning and capacity. In extreme cases where traumatic and highly stressful events are the norm in the early developmental stage, the human brain responds with a disrupted, irregular and eventually dysfunctional series of responses which may well limit the range of reactions that the child can make (Perry, 1997).

Overall, the advances in knowledge of the developing brain, particularly those resulting from the last two decades, have led us to re-emphasise how interactive and crucial are the first years of life. The research certainly tells us that all brains appear to thrive best in a nurturing social environment which provides consistency and reliability, together with interventions which both secure the child yet enable her to explore and play safely (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Smith, 2001). What the research cannot be said to do is to commit to specific and universal features of curriculum design or interactive, early learning settings. We know more, but we must still be cautious, despite the fact that most signposts point in the same direction. We must also recall that there are other periods of crucial learning and re-learning during our lifetimes, notably during adolescence. We must pay careful attention to early learning and do our utmost to facilitate it, but we must not regard all early learning as so fixed as to be incapable of remediation.

### **Integration of early childhood provision**

Integration of services is not a new idea. Robert Owen tried to establish some elements in New Lanarkshire, in England in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Over the intervening two hundred years or so, there have been many attempts to unify services for the poor and needy and, more recently, for all our children. Attempts at 'joined up thinking', as it is sometimes called, have been seen across North America, Europe, the Nordic countries, Australia and New Zealand, Chile, Argentina and the former USSR. After all, 'Head Start' was just such a venture.

Education and care are seen as public goods and much more effective if they are the two main elements of services which are integrated ideally with health, social advice and parental support, together with opportunities for adult counselling and even training. This means a genuine, systemic commitment by country, state or province to Early Childhood Education and Care and the family and community in which it is embedded. It also implies that professional organisations and Ministerial Departments will avoid 'turf disputes' and concentrate on the seamless cognitive, social and physical development of the child as a family and community member.

It is probable that a holistic view of the child and of childhood is still the dominant Western view of what is most desirable (OECD, 2001), but there is also a strong instrumental view of childhood as a means of intervention and prevention, and as a means of 'social engineering'. There is also the Nordic and Scandinavian view, and that often espoused by critical theory, in which the child is seen as not simply being

there to be used or positioned as an instrument of future economic or social success. This perspective sees the child as having the right to be, as well as to become, to enjoy and to choose: in short to enjoy childhood in her own way (Abbott and Moylett, 1999; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Qvortrup, 2000).

Clearly, 'integration' of services means different things to different people and operates differently in different contexts. There is no sense of 'one size fits all'; yet local, community and municipal management draws one inexorably closer to the practical elements of the concept, because devolved management is necessarily closer to local need and aspiration. Under the current British schemes for integration - a mixture of 'Sure Start', 'Early Excellence Centres' and now 'Children's Centres' - the term 'integrated' was used for those centres offering:

- high quality and integrated early education and childcare
- family support, involvement and adult learning
- certain health service support
- practitioner training
- dissemination of good practice.

Bertram et al (2001) stated, ***"A key and distinguishing feature of the EEC Programme is its emphasis on delivering high quality educational opportunities for both the children and the adults who use the service...(and)... the pilot EECs are not uniform in their approach to this work and do not offer a single model of operation."*** (op cit, pp.6-7)

One should note, therefore, that structural and functional cohesion are not necessarily the same and that there is no single model which suits all purposes. However, it is clearly fundamentally and logically sound, especially given the earlier arguments set out in this paper, that care and education should be better blended. Fundamental to success is that Ministerial and executive integration has to occur. This will involve good communication, parity of status and a willingness to avoid dispute over any putative levels of professional superiority, or notions that one stage of education or care is intrinsically more important than another. Moreover, the monopoly of female staff in the early years may occasionally lead to the view that child-rearing is instinctual and somehow of essentially lower status. This can sometimes have the disastrous effect of producing a self-satisfied, insulated hegemony of males in the more senior echelons of an education service.

In 2002 a group of South Australian professional early years staff representing all levels of practice formed the Early Childhood Criterion Reference Group. This group met regularly to talk of their aspirations and to outline principles of a system of ECEC deemed reasonably seamless. These principles, set out below, fit well with comments made in the pioneering English work by Osgood and Sharp (2000). They also correspond to some of the principal issues emerging in the British Council/DfES Inquiry into ECEC provision in the five countries of Australia, England, Germany, Greece and Portugal (Bertram et al 2003).

- Care, education and healthy development are mutually interdependent and should be increasingly blended.
- Clear policy and directional support is necessary at all levels of government.
- There must be a clear focus on the needs and interests of the community.
- There must be relative ease of access (both geographical and in terms of time).
- Provision should be based upon an active knowledge of child development which is itself embedded in understanding of the family and that community.

- High quality, focused early childhood experience is required for leadership; and good leadership support structures are necessary.
- Dynamic, flexible, sometimes non-bureaucratic processes are needed to cope with change and adaptation to local need.
- The system must clearly demonstrate that it values relationships at all levels.
- There needs to be sensitive resourcing, staffing and appropriate adult:child ratios.
- Programmes should be available which match children's developmental needs and interests, including play.

It is clear that the traditional split between care and education is no longer tenable at either government or practitioner level. Many countries have recognised this. Some, like South Australia, already have a unified Department for Education and Children's Services. Some, like Denmark, have concentrated considerable attention and resources on bringing more male personnel into the system. The diversification of the workforce is itself a serious issue in Europe, particularly in Belgium, Denmark and France (Moss, 2003, p.4). Many countries are focusing attention and resources on 'light touch' programmes and curricula which are available from birth. Others such as Finland and Sweden have considerably upgraded their initial training and education programmes, so that professional carers have similar status and opportunities to those of teachers; and, by creating multi-professional teams for services to children under the age of statutory schooling, have made the seamless care and education of their young children much more feasible.

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