

# Where to childhood



# now for early education and care?



By Dr Alison Elliott

Alison is the Research Director of ACER's Early Childhood Education research program.

*Early childhood education and care has been a rapidly growing part of Australian education for over twenty years and now caters for more than half a million Australian children. Yet there is little consistency and continuity between learning programs, no agreed or desirable learning outcomes and large numbers of unqualified or minimally qualified staff.*

**Alison Elliott** examines the issues.

Australia's early childhood sector caters for well over half a million 0-5 year-olds in a myriad of services that are legislated and funded by a complex network of agencies and organisations, and operated and administered by a range of government, community and private for profit operators.

About three quarters of children aged 3 to 4 years used some type of formal child care in 2002, including home-based Family Day Care. Yet, little is known about how children fare. There are no agreed standards and learning programs across services, no agreed positions on staffing and staff qualifications, and no strategies for mapping, tracking or comparing children's experiences and outcomes. In short, there is little monitoring of children's progress and little investment in research and development.

There are two main early childhood service types – child care and sessional preschools and kindergartens. Child care is divided into centre-based Long Day Care and home-based Family Day Care. Both operate on a long day basis. Preschools (also called kindergartens in some states) provide early educational experiences during typical school hours, often on a half-day basis. Other early childhood services under the early childhood services umbrella include Play Groups, Occasional Care, Early Intervention Programs and Registered Carers. Sometimes the first two to three years of primary school for children aged 5 to 8 years are included within the broad 'early childhood' sweep.

Most early childhood sector growth has been in provision of child care programs for young children while parents work. But in the scramble to provide affordable child care for working families, and without a national policy and vision for early childhood education, the once strong focus on early learning and education has slipped into the background.

There is growing anecdotal evidence of a widening 'care' – 'education' divide in early childhood services that is being supported and sustained by differential funding and resourcing. Closing it will be difficult unless there is a rethinking of early childhood policy and a commitment to funding services and supporting families, rather than the market driven approach that currently prevails. Further, despite widespread recognition that early years experiences have a major impact on longer term educational and social outcomes, many children miss out altogether. There is no universal entitlement to, or provision for, early childhood education and care. A national, independent review of early childhood services is long overdue.

In the early 1990s, concerns about quality within the rapidly increasing child care

centres resulted in the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) administered by the National Child Care Accreditation Council. While QIAS has ensured more consistent quality across child care centres, it does not focus on children's outcomes or on monitoring and guiding their growth and progress across learning and developmental areas.

The lack of inter-service and inter-professional agreement and explicitness on what is valued and how to monitor learning and educational progress makes it difficult to assess the extent to which early childhood services are impacting on children's development or predicting successful adjustment to school. It's also difficult to make comparisons across services. Is it reasonable to compare the learning progress and outcomes of a four-year-old child in child care, Family Day Care or preschool when goals, purposes and programs are so different both within and across service types?

### **Creating and sustaining quality early childhood services**

Ideally, early childhood services should provide a comprehensive education and care program for children in the 0-5 age group. Unfortunately they often don't. While the literature is clear about the close connections between care, development and education, Australia's separate histories and traditions of early childhood 'care' programs and 'education' programs have resulted in clear policy, funding and administrative divisions. The result is a twin system of early childhood services – child care and preschools, supported by separate funding and legislative arrangements.

The different Commonwealth and state-based funding, administrative and legislative requirements have resulted in complex layers and connections between government, voluntary groups, the public

education systems, independent schools, community organisations, and free market forces, small business owner-operators and major commercial ventures. So complex is the early childhood landscape, that most people, including families seeking early childhood education and care, have difficulty understanding and negotiating the maze.

Discussions and debate about early childhood education and care are most often concerned with supply, demand and affordability, as evidenced in the 2004 Australian Federal election campaign. Clearly, these are important issues. There is a well documented shortage of child care places, particularly for children under two years. There is a 'crisis' in staffing, with shortages, low salaries and poor working conditions. Child care is an increasingly unattractive employment option. Child care and preschool affordability are constant problems for families. Fees in most of the more than 4000 child care centres and many preschools and kindergartens rival those of Australia's 67 'elite' independent schools.

Contrary to much public perception, early childhood care and education is not 'government provided'. Nationally, most preschools and child care centres are private and independently operated, although often on a not-for-profit basis. Most families pay fees for their children to attend preschool or child care. Fortunately, many families using child care centres and Family Day Care are eligible for a Commonwealth-funded, means tested fee subsidy called the *Child Care Benefit*. But it does not apply to the more than 200 000 children who attend preschools and kindergartens. Some state and local government bodies also provide means-tested fee subsidies for families using community preschool services. Preschools run by public school systems are usually free.





Typically, preschool education is provided for only a few hours a week, and usually just for four-year-olds. Clearly, this limited availability presents logistical problems for working families who need care and education services during working hours. Many families must use several early childhood service types to accommodate children's care and education needs.

The biggest growth in the past two decades has been in the child care sector. Australia now has some 4338 child care centres, an increase of 142 per cent from 1991. Almost all are privately operated, either by not-for-profit groups or by commercial businesses. Most (approximately 72 per cent) are private for profit ventures and the proportion is growing. The growth in child care and especially the private for profit sector, has increased the importance of commercial proprietors, including the



'child care chains' that can operate hundreds of centres. To their credit, commercial operators have stepped in to meet demand for child care where governments have failed. Indeed, much of the pressure to provide places to meet families' child care needs has been offset by growth in private for profit centres and in the low cost, home-based Family Day Care.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicate that approximately 83 per cent of four-year-olds and 63 per cent of three-year-olds participate in some sort of 'formal child care', but not necessarily in a centre-based early learning and development program. For many, 'formal' means home-based care. In fact, only just over half of four-year-old children attend an 'educational' preschool or kindergarten program. While some child care centres provide strong early childhood education programs with qualified early childhood teachers, many don't.

The net result is that many young children miss out on early childhood education experiences and others have only limited participation opportunities.

### **A vision and direction for early childhood education?**

It is against this complex backdrop that early childhood services directions, visions and policy must be considered. Contemporary research shows children's development is dependent on environmental quality, including the quality of early care and education settings. There is widespread evidence of the importance of the early years to later social and academic competence and agreement about the need to raise the overall quality of early childhood experiences, including the transition-to-school phase. But despite knowledge of the positive influence of early childhood education on school progression and educational outcomes, there is no agreement on how to optimise early learning experiences for all children.

Although Australian research on early childhood care and education outcomes is limited, international research and research in school-based educational settings show that rich, well planned learning experiences impact positively on children's social and cognitive outcomes. They help close the traditional school 'achievement gap' between children from lower income groups and those from middle and upper income family backgrounds.

Importantly, issues relating to quality and effectiveness of early childhood services must be addressed as part of a coherent early childhood services vision and framework. Fundamental to the issue of quality and outcomes for young children is dismantling the 'care' – 'education' divide to create more seamless, early childhood learning programs for all children. Unfortunately, the 1980s vision of holistic, integrated children's services, offering strong care and education programs has long faded. As new long day care services evolved, few were able or willing to provide a comprehensive and seamless education and care program for children in the 0-5 age group. The cost of qualified early childhood staff was just too high.

Rather, what has emerged is two largely separate systems. Child 'care', delivered in child care centres and home based settings (Family Day Care) and early 'education', delivered in preschools and kindergartens run by community organisations and by public and independent schools.

The different levels and types of staffing in child care and preschools and kindergartens illustrate the divisions most vividly. Most preschools and kindergartens have qualified early childhood teachers, but only about 8 per cent of staff in child care centres have an early childhood degree level qualification. There is no national agreement on the appropriate qualifications

for staff responsible for the development, education and care of children below school age.

It is the twin systems of child care and preschool education, and the associated issues of differential quality and outcomes for children, that are looming as the biggest policy challenge facing the early childhood field and the wider community. Our early childhood programs must *both* optimise early learning *and* development and provide care during parents' working hours.

### The quality and outcomes agenda

The wider quality and effectiveness movement in education has identified practitioner knowledge and skill, reflection and advocacy, interactions with children and professional development, together with vision, dedication and adaptability as key factors in optimising learning progress and outcomes.

Commonsense, plus evidence from the school sector, and from a growing body of early childhood research, suggests that more skilled practitioners are better able to engage with children and optimise developmental outcomes. But, there is little evidence on factors influencing Australian children's quality of experiences and their learning outcomes in early childhood settings. Even with the national Quality Improvement and Accreditation System in child care centres, little is known about how staff meet explicit and implicit demands of the quality principles, how the principles are interpreted, or about children's early care and education experiences and their impact on development and learning. Even less is known about children's progress in preschools or in Family Day Care. Other than in South Australia, there is no mandated curriculum framework to guide educators, and there are no programs to monitor or assess progress and outcomes for children.

The international evidence on practitioner competence in early childhood points to the importance of quality pedagogies for children's success. As in the school sector, teachers' knowledge and understanding of learning and development, their interactions with children, and their modelling, scaffolding, and questioning techniques seem to be key factors influencing developmental outcomes.

That pedagogic quality is emerging as important in early childhood settings is not surprising given research in the school sector highlighting the strong association between good teaching and student achievement. Ingvarson (2002) says that the message from this research is clear. Policy makers must invest *first and most* in teacher quality. The same is almost certainly true in the early childhood services sector but needs to be explored.

### Where to now?

On the surface, Australia seems to have a sound system of early childhood education and care, but a closer look shows that equity of access, experience and outcome for young children is a long way off.

We might wonder why issues of government funding, equity of access, quality and outcomes, accountability, teacher quality and effectiveness, and the shift to 'private' education, so contentious in the schooling sector, raise barely a whisper when applied to children five and under? The increasing monopoly of not just 'private' and not-for-profit, but commercial and for-profit early childhood centres, has been all but ignored in the public debates about education funding.

There is an urgent need for a review of early childhood care and education. We need to create a national vision and action plan. We need to decide whether we want a universal entitlement to quality early childhood education and care

independent of families' ability to pay.

The current 'care' – 'education' divide must be closed. We need to create more holistic, integrated early education and care services for children, and seriously consider accessibility, affordability and quality. Unless action is taken now, the twin system of care and education will be set in concrete. More affluent families will avoid child care altogether. Families eligible for the *Child Care Benefit* will cluster in services where fees, and hence quality, are kept low to maximise affordability. Services and quality will be further tied to family socio-economic status and ability to pay.

Today, there is widespread recognition of the longer term educational and social outcomes of early childhood education, but we have little idea about the extent to which child care centres, preschools, and Family Day Care afford rich early developmental opportunities and promote sound learning outcomes. We don't have a mechanism to monitor, assess and compare children's progress, or to evaluate the outcomes of the many different types of early childhood programs. We're not even sure how early childhood programs should look, how curriculum should be structured, what values, learning experiences and outcomes could and should be expected and what staffing standards are most likely to ensure optimum outcomes for children. There is an urgent need for a review of early childhood service provision and outcomes, and future policy development needs to be informed by good evidence. To close the school achievement gap, we need to be much clearer about what works in early childhood, under what conditions and for what children. ■

---

For a full list of references for this article and suggested further reading, see the online version of *Research Developments* at [www.acer.edu.au](http://www.acer.edu.au)