

Translating early childhood research evidence to inform policy and practice

Policy Brief – Five Years On

It has been five years since the first edition of *Policy Brief* was launched (2006) with the strapline *translating early childhood research evidence to inform policy and practice*. The goal was to select important issues in child and family health, review and analyse the relevant research, and 'translate' this into a series of practical recommendations that could inform policy and practice. The format of each issue has been consistent, with four main headings – 'why is this issue important?'; 'what does the research tell us?'; 'what are the implications of the research?'; and 'considerations for policy and programs'. After 21 *Policy Briefs*, it seems an appropriate time to review what we have achieved to date and how much there is still to do.

Looking back

The inaugural *Policy Brief* – Early childhood and the life course – provided the rationale for increased policy attention and investment in the early years:

What happens to children in the early years has consequences right through the course of their lives. There are many opportunities to intervene and make a difference to the lives of children and young people. The evidence shows the most effective time to intervene is early childhood, including the antenatal period.

Subsequent *Policy Briefs* have covered a diverse range of topics using an ecological model to acknowledge the multiple influences on early childhood development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These topics have ranged from the broad (the impact of poverty on early childhood; early years care and education; parenting young children; integrating services for children and their families; evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence) to the specific (childhood mental health; overweight and obesity in childhood; literacy in early childhood; television and early childhood development).

Despite the diversity of the topics addressed, six themes have recurred:

1. The importance of strategic communication:

Communicating the importance of early childhood development, and the need to invest in it, needs to be incorporated into debate at all levels of society, government and workforce.

2. Integration of policies between government departments and levels of government:

The commonwealth and state governments need to align their investment and policies regarding young children and their families in order to avoid duplication and maximise outcomes.

3. Improved coordination and integration of services:

To improve outcomes for children and their families, universal and primary care services across the health, education and community sectors need to be better coordinated with one another.

4. Research and evaluation: To effectively inform early childhood policy, we need Australian research to know which programs and practices work, and which do not. We also need to be able to use practice-based evidence to inform our approaches, and apply what we do know.

5. Recognising the important role of early childhood education and care:

Early childhood cannot be categorised into health, education and development, as these are one and the same in early childhood. Professionals working in preschool settings are not simply child minders but providers of rich health, education and development programs for children.

6. Parental leave and family-friendly workplaces:

Despite advances marked by the introduction of paid parental leave in 2011, Australia still lacks universal family-friendly policies and public acceptance of the importance of family-friendly workplaces.

Recommendations

From these recurring themes came a number of recurrent recommendations, suggesting there are fundamental issues still to be addressed, including:

- Appropriate vocational training and subsequent skilling-up of the early years workforce
- Flexible parental leave and family-friendly workplaces
- Facilitating research to evaluate the efficacy of established programs and following up that research, where appropriate, with funding to 'scale up'
- Obtaining sound epidemiological data that can be used to inform policy and resource allocation
- Providing credible, accessible and practical information to parents and supporting them in their parenting role.

Our progress

We have seen some impressive government policy initiatives at both the commonwealth and state/territory level, particularly over the past five years.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) released the *National Early Childhood Development Strategy – Investing in the Early Years* in 2009, building on earlier policies such as the *National Agenda for Early Childhood* (FaHCSIA, 2003), the *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* (FaHCSIA, 2003) and *Communities for Children* (FaHCSIA, 2003). The vision expressed in the Strategy was that 'by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation'.

As part of the Strategy, two very important pieces of work have arisen that are likely to have a profound impact in the short and long term:

1. the *National Quality Framework* for early childhood education and care (DEEWR, 2010), and
2. the *Early Years Learning Framework* (COAG, 2009).

These two frameworks have the potential to facilitate radical change for children in the years before they start formal schooling. Grounded in research findings and introduced following widespread consultation with academics and practitioners, these frameworks represent a paradigm shift in our approach to early childhood education and care (ECEC). They mark a move away from the traditional conceptualisation of services for children in the preschool years as child minding, towards

an understanding of the importance of providing rich learning environments for young children.

Further evidence of government commitment to the early years can be found in four other policies:

- *Universal Access to Preschool* – mandating that by the end of 2013 all four-year-old children will have access to at least 15 hours per week of preschool for at least 40 weeks in the year before they attend school. Each preschool program will be delivered by an early childhood teacher with four years of university training (COAG, 2008).
- The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* – a long-term national approach to protect the safety and wellbeing of Australia's children (COAG, 2009).
- *Growing up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*, 2004, and *Footprints in Time*, 2008 – funding to continue to follow the development of 10,000 children and families from around Australia and 1687 Indigenous children, their families and communities. These studies are investigating the contribution of children's social, economic and cultural environments to adjustment and wellbeing.
- The *Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)* – funding to continue to roll out the national census of the health and development of Australian children in their first year of full-time schooling (DEEWR, 2009).

These policies are a significant achievement and represent a far-reaching government acknowledgement of the importance of investing in the early years. They mark real progress for Australia and are the envy of other countries.

More importantly, they provide a robust, broadly conceived base from which to launch the second and third phases of reform: moving from broad strategies and frameworks to specific action plans that are grounded in evidence and best practice, and then implementing those plans in a systematic and efficient manner. This is likely to be more difficult and challenging, and will require ongoing investment of considerable material and intellectual capital.

Looking forward

Despite the considerable progress, there are still many issues that have not been adequately addressed and recommendations that are still to be actioned. At best we can say that these reforms represent a work in progress.

Continuing with the common themes of our 21 *Policy Briefs* to date, following are the areas that have been recommended in previous *Policy Briefs* and that we would argue need much more attention:

Strategic communication (PB 1,15)

Although early childhood is clearly on the policy radar of governments, academics and practitioners, there is considerable evidence that it has not yet grabbed the attention of the mainstream media nor the lay public (Open Mind Research Group, 2008; MCEECDYA, 2010). Little attention has been paid to the importance of framing the messages so that they are understood by the lay public. A recent study documented the lack of awareness about the importance of the early years amongst most of Australian media, and its poor coverage as a serious issue worthy of discussion (Centre for Advanced Journalism, 2010).

As we enter the next phase of reform, understanding and support from the community and media will be crucial. When the government is developing far-reaching and costly policy initiatives, thought needs to be given to the best way to communicate the rationale and benefits to the various stakeholders; this needs to be far more than a simple media release. Serious thought needs to be given to how best to frame messages about the importance of the early years, and where possible, the framing should be informed by empirical research.

Integration of policies between government departments and levels of government and improved coordination and integration of services

(PB 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14)

This has been the most common recommendation across the life of *Policy Brief*, and arguably remains our biggest challenge. Further policy alignment is required between government departments (horizontal coordination), and between commonwealth and state governments (vertical coordination). Indeed, in many jurisdictions there is little or no policy coordination within the same department, let alone any coordination of department-funded programs for children and families. Current programs tend to be delivered in discrete, narrowly defined service silos with rigid eligibility requirements, sometimes with a 'one size fits all' approach. Programs and services need an integrated approach that is supported by all levels of government.

We continue to see programs that focus on a single problem or risk factor, despite research repeatedly showing that problems and risk factors cluster together

(CCCH, 2010). At best, this lack of coordination leads to duplication and inefficiency; at worst, it creates barriers to the many families who would benefit from well-conceived and accessible programs.

This issue needs to be addressed at multiple levels as a matter of urgency. No new policies should be developed or announced without consideration of what already exists, and attention needs to be paid to how the new policies or programs would integrate seamlessly with existing ones.

At the community level, service redevelopment should be guided by a concept of virtual integrated centres with 'no wrong doors'. This approach has been well described (DEECD, 2010), and there are evidence-based resources that demonstrate a step-by-step approach for how to achieve this 'no wrong doors' approach.

Research and evaluation (PB 7, 9, 14, 17, 21)

While LSAC and the AEDI are wonderful examples of our governments' understanding of the importance of data, this area is still in its infancy.

Most of the evidence we have about early childhood programs comes from overseas studies, and there are obvious caveats in translating these into the Australian context. In our own communities, we know very little about what works, for whom, and under what circumstances, let alone the dose/response effects – intensity, frequency and duration of programs.

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Most of our existing programs have never been evaluated for their efficacy, so that we have little idea of whether or not they meet their stated goals. Indeed many programs that are in existence do not have clear and measurable goals and objectives. We continually miss opportunities to introduce new programs or policies in a research paradigm, so that we can document whether or not they work.

We need to embrace Drucker's concept of 'organised abandonment' (Drucker, 1999) of policies and programs where there is no evidence of efficacy. From here we can begin to build our own strong Australian research and evaluation base and start to focus on policies and programs that are shown to work. Although this requires investment of scarce resources, in the long term it is likely to pay for itself many times over.

Obtaining Australian data regarding the efficacy of existing and any new programs should be a priority of this next phase of reform. At times of scarce resources, it becomes even more important that we fund only those programs that make a demonstrable difference to outcomes.

Recognising the important role of early childhood education and care

(PB 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13)

The reforms to early childhood education and care have already highlighted staff shortages in this sector, as well as disparities in career structure, pay and conditions for the different areas of the workforce. Both these issues need to be addressed if the potential of the *National Quality Framework* and the *Early Years Learning Framework* is to be fully realised.

There needs to be a rapid expansion of tertiary training courses for early childhood professionals, with encouragement and incentives for the existing workforce to obtain formal higher qualifications. In addition, there is a challenging retraining agenda for all professionals who work with young children and their families. Professionals have to be able to understand and interpret emerging research findings and integrate them into their practice, as well as learn to work in a more coordinated way in teams and with professionals from other disciplines.

Parental leave and family-friendly workplaces (PB 1, 7, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16)

The first day of 2011 saw the encouraging introduction of universal paid maternity leave, albeit limited – a first for Australia. The considerable and often strident opposition from sections of the community that greeted this initiative is indicative of a lack of appreciation for the critical role parents have in providing the nurturing and responsive environment infants and young children need.

With a few notable exceptions, there has been a disappointing lack of leadership and support in this area from business. Business does not yet seem to understand that paid parental leave and flexible working conditions are ultimately in companies' best interests. In the long term, family-friendly workplaces and the subsequent improvements to social infrastructure, are likely to be the most important contributing factors to the future economic prosperity of our country.

Australia is increasingly seen internationally as moving to centre stage in terms of the implementation of informed, evidence-based policy initiatives that reflect government understanding of the importance of early childhood. We believe that *Policy Brief* has contributed to this process through its ability to highlight the fact that examining what the science says about particular issues will always result in better public policy. As Australia moves into the next challenging phases of the policy reform agenda, it will be even more important to use the available research in order to build on and continue the important reforms.

About the Centre for Community Child Health

The Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) has been at the forefront of Australian research into early childhood development and behaviour for over two decades. The CCCH conducts research into the many conditions and common problems faced by children that are either preventable or can be improved if recognised and managed early.

Policy Brief

Policy Brief aims to stimulate informed debate about issues that affect children's health and wellbeing. Each issue draws on current research and international best practice. *Policy Brief* is produced by the CCCH, with peer review and advice from an editorial board of national experts, and an advisory group of experts in children's policy and service delivery.

References

A full list of references and further reading used in the development of this *Policy Brief* is available from: www.rch.org.au/ccch/policybriefs.cfm

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