



What about the kids?

Improving the experiences of infants and young children in a changing world

“What about the kids?”

How we nurture our babies and young children is universally regarded as fundamental to our humanity. But the ways in which we choose to care for our infants and toddlers are infinitely diverse. Each era, every culture and all families endeavour to create the best possible start in life for their young, but they face many and varied challenges.

It is concern about the ways in which Australia is meeting the test of caring for our infants and young children today that has prompted the NSW Commission for Children and Young People, the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, and the National Investment for the Early Years organisation (NIFTeY) to look closely at the current situation.

Our earlier work *A Head Start for Australia's Children* provided a blueprint for what Australia needed to do to give our children a good start in life. *What about the kids?*, builds on this earlier work and puts forward concrete suggestions for policy improvements to support the care and education of all babies and young children. This is done both in this short paper and in the larger research paper of the same title by Frances Press.



The critical early years in a changing world

Young children and babies live their lives intensely in the present. To grow and develop they need an immediate loving, secure and responsive relationship with the adults who nurture them. But while the eyes of the infant may be only for the mother or primary caregiver, her world is influenced by a much larger context; the social, cultural and economic life into which she has been born. The lives of our infants and young children are affected by the decisions we make at all levels; family, community and government.

Significant research in the past decade has confirmed what early childhood experts have long believed – that these early years of life are critical to our development and have vital implications for our wellbeing right through adulthood. Our ability to live life to the fullest - to love and care for others, to achieve our goals in work, leisure and in family life – is bound up with our experience of life in the early years.

Given such evidence, it is clear that investment in the early years will pay off for all of us. It is critical to our children's lives, and to their families, but also to the future productivity of Australia.

But who looks after our infants and young children today? And what real choices do parents have for their children? What support do families have to enable them to make the best choices for the future generation of Australians? What is children's experience of childcare?

Our responses to the care of infants and young children are being shaped in a changing world. In *Developmental Health and the Wealth of Nations*, Keating and Hertzman describe as "modernity's paradox" the fact that although many post-industrial economies are getting richer, there are increasing concerns about the physical and developmental health of growing numbers of children. In the middle of "material abundance" there are rising "threats to healthy human development". It appears that the world is changing in ways that are affecting the critical early years of our children's lives and we are struggling to adjust.

With forceful simplicity, the situation is summed up by a young person interviewed in a focus group in 2004:

It may simply be my naivety, but a child should be able to have food, shelter, clothing, valued education and achievements, love and hugs. Why is it so hard?

(ACT Department of Disability Housing and Community Services)

What is happening today?

Early childhood education and care

Childcare is a hotly-debated topic and the jury is still out on a number of issues surrounding the benefits and harm of non-parental care. But there is an emerging consensus that poor quality formal childcare is damaging; that the longer the hours (particularly if more than 35 per week) spent in centre-based care by children under one year, the greater the risks for their healthy emotional and behavioural development. This may accentuate difficulties in the quality of their relationships with parents. On the other hand non-parental care for older children aged 3 and 4 years with a stronger educational slant, can be a bonus for the child, and good quality formal childcare in the earlier years for children from disadvantaged or abusive backgrounds, can also be highly beneficial.

In Australia today early education and care services cater to children 5 years and under. In this paper the term childcare refers to those services which include formal services such as preschool (3-5 year olds), long day care, family day care, regulated home-based care, occasional care, in-home care and outside school hours care; and to informal care such as unregulated home-based care, nanny care, babysitting, and a range of informal arrangements between family and friends.

Surveys show that almost half of all Australian children aged from birth to 11 years use informal and formal childcare and the numbers are increasing, and they do so largely because their parents work. Fifty-nine per cent of children within couple families used children's services if both parents were employed, and 74% of children in sole parent families used children's services if that parent was working. Ironically, there is evidence that disadvantaged families, and those with no jobs, use formal care for babies much less, and their 3-4 year olds are less likely to attend preschool, often for financial reasons.

As formal childcare becomes a reality for more and more babies and young children, we must make sure the experience is a good one.

Poor quality care is probably more common than we think. Research in Canada and the UK has shown that quality in "for profit" childcare especially in the large corporate chains, is lower than in community controlled childcare. There has been no comparable Australian research nor validation of the reliability of the National Childcare Accreditation Council's accreditation program and there is a notable absence of sanctions against badly performing centres.

The regulations covering conditions such as staff to child ratios, skill requirements and proper recognition of staff also present serious concerns. Current staffing ratios militate against the time consuming, responsive, sensitive and attuned care that infants and very young children need to thrive. This highly valuable work – caring for the young and vulnerable upon whom Australia's future depends – is widely underpaid, under-skilled and undervalued.

To work or stay at home?

Much research has pointed to the stresses families face in balancing their work and family lives. In a survey undertaken by the Australian Childhood Foundation, 71% of parents interviewed believed that balancing the needs of work and family was a serious issue for them.

Yet there is widespread agreement throughout the community that the amount and the quality of time adults spend with children is an important factor in terms of children's wellbeing. For children too, time with family is highly and warmly regarded:

"My family is special because they are all ways (sic) there for me."

(Jasmine, 7 years old, Focus Group, ACT Department of Disability Housing and Community Services)

With more young Australians in childcare from younger ages, we need to ask why? Are parents choosing the amount of time their children spend in care because they believe it is best for them? Or are such choices dictated by having to work long hours even when their children are young?

Clearly the work demands that many families face erodes the time available for parents to spend with children. The absence of paid maternity and parental leave is of particular concern because it limits the choices families can make.

Poverty

Poverty too severely restricts choice. And in the middle of the country's growing affluence, poverty still burdens the lives of 14.7% of Australian children. Poverty is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest risks to children's health and development. In Australia it is largely related to lone parenthood and joblessness. Also, research has shown that Indigenous children are particularly hard hit by poverty. Indigenous children in Australia are over represented in all high risk areas, a fact that has been recognized by the Productivity Commission's *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report, Key Indicators 2005*. This Report highlights the participation of Indigenous children in preschool programs as a major first step to overcoming disadvantage.

Evidence shows that all families affected by poverty and disadvantage benefit significantly from high quality childcare. The nurture and education these young children can receive in childcare centres and preschool is critical especially for those who live in violent and dysfunctional families. But according to the research, these children are the ones who are most often missing out, either because it is too expensive or because they are socially excluded.

While striking the right balance between work and family is a challenge, there is no doubt that paid employment can provide a pathway out of poverty for many families. Nevertheless, there is a need to consider carefully how this aim is pursued, so that it strengthens rather than weakens family functioning.

From July 2006, parents who apply for Parenting Payment will be required to seek part-time work (a minimum of 15 hours per week) when their youngest child turns six and will move to the lower paying Newstart Allowance, when their youngest child turns eight, where they will be financially worse off by \$30 a week. They will also face a higher effective marginal tax rate when they re-enter the workforce.

Parents may also face additional costs to re-enter the workforce. These costs could include transport, clothing and childcare. Under this type of income support regime, many sole parents will be juggling the demands of work and family with little immediate improvement in the financial situation of the family. It is also likely that parents required to re-enter the workforce may have little time or energy left over to engage in school activities which is an important contributor to children's improved academic results.

Tax

Tax benefits can be an important source of support to families and the Family Tax Benefit Part A illustrates this. But Part B is, in essence, paid only to families with a single income earner, because the family is eligible for the benefit regardless of the income earned. This system favours families with a stay at home spouse, and disadvantages low and middle income families whose income is derived from the efforts of both partners.

Part B presents a real barrier to women from low income families getting back into the workforce. Because access to Part B reduces as soon as the non-working partner (usually the mother) earns quite a small amount of money, regardless of the income of their working spouse, it makes more financial sense for the single income earner (usually the father) to work longer or take on a second job.

Finally, the tax system as a whole presents real difficulties for families who choose to claim regular family payments throughout the year, rather than wait for an end of tax year rebate. Such families are likely to be those in most need of regular income supplementation. In order to claim periodic family payments, families must estimate their annual income. To do so accurately has proved difficult for many families and many find that they are left with a debt that must be repaid to the government. This places a very real financial burden on many families, particularly those who can least afford it.

Work place culture

It is not only economic factors which dictate the choices made by families in caring for their babies and toddlers. The Australian work place culture today is largely blind to, if not antagonistic towards, families with young children. Anecdotal evidence abounds of the unfriendly nature of many work places. And despite the lip service paid to the importance of the family in Australia, those who care for our young children, mothers largely, and young childcare workers, have very low status, which translates into an acute lack of bargaining power in employment.

The evidence of such negative attitudes manifests itself in the chronic lack of family friendly policies available in the work place.

Maternity leave

One of the major factors which send many mothers back to work earlier than they would choose is a lack of paid maternity leave.

As women give birth and breastfeed, maternity leave is the logical starting point for policy aimed at enabling families to love and nurture their babies. Paid maternity leave plays a key role in providing the time for mothers and babies to become attuned to one another and attachments between mothers and babies have long been recognised as central to children's healthy development.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) *Maternity Protection Convention (ILO 183)* provides for a minimum maternity leave entitlement of 14 weeks on two-thirds pay and encourages leave to be extended to 18 weeks. The European Union calls for 14 weeks on full pay. The World Health Organization recommends a 16 week period.

Yet Australian women have no legislated right to paid maternity leave. Australia and the United States are the only two OECD countries without a paid maternity leave system.

Family-friendly working conditions

Access to paid leave for family responsibilities is an integral part of a family friendly work place. Flexible work times, and part-time work, are also critical. But to be truly family friendly, these need to be negotiated arrangements, not unilaterally imposed by employers. At the current time, access to family friendly work practices is not evenly spread and tends to be more prevalent in higher status jobs.

For full-time employees the working week is getting longer. More than 85% of employed men in full-time positions work an average of 45.3 hours per week. Expectations of long hours of work have implications for the time children have to spend in childcare. And while women are more likely to cut short their hours, men tend to work longer hours after the birth of their young children, hence depriving both father and child of the joys and rewards of sharing time with each other.

Unpredictable and non-standard work hours are also damaging to young families. Provisions that enable employers to unilaterally vary the hours worked by an employee or require additional hours to be worked, encroach on the capacity of employees to plan and balance work and family responsibilities.

For mothers in the work force, unpredictable work hours are more likely to stem from a reliance on casual work. The irregular and unpredictable nature of much casual work can make it difficult for families to find appropriate childcare, and for mothers to spend quality time with their babies.

How can we create real choice?

Clearly governments and business need to develop policy responses to the needs of families that recognise the diversity and complexity of family life in contemporary Australian society. Early childhood experts, Daniel Keating and Fraser Mustard describe the situation thus:

...labour market policies that do not recognize the extensive demands placed on families with young children, combined with the dearth of good, affordable childcare, create a situation in which adequate nurturing of the next generation cannot be assured.

Social Economic Factors, Human Development (1993)

It is obvious from the discussion above, that young children depend on the whole of society for their nurture and care. Their early lives are affected by policies across the social and political spectrum including education, employment, health, tax and welfare. It is critical that a strategic whole-of-government framework brings together these policies and develops an effective service system for young children and their families.

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People, the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, and NIFTeY, have contributed to such work through the release of *A Headstart for Australia's Children*. There is however, an immediate need to give a real choice for parents balancing work and family and to provide quality childcare for babies and young children. In the short term we believe the following actions should be taken to address the issues facing families and their young children today and which hinder efforts to provide the best experiences for our young children.

Taking Action

The nation needs to develop a strategic, whole-of-government framework that addresses the interactions of the key policy areas of parental leave, income support, and access to good quality early childhood education and care in order to provide genuine choice to families so that we can achieve better long term outcomes for all our children.

Quality Childcare and Strong Regulation

To improve the quality and availability of formal childcare and early education the following actions should be taken:

- Implement a staff to child ratio of 1:3 for children under two years in centre-based care, and limit the number of infants and toddlers in home-based care
- Strengthen training and qualification requirements for staff in children's services which include:
 - Within five years introduce entry level child development and family centred practice training for all contact staff in children's services
 - Within ten years introduce early childhood teacher qualified staff in all early childhood programs
 - Immediately develop and implement strategies to address the shortage in both diploma-trained and early childhood teacher qualified staff
 - Immediately develop strategies to train more Indigenous staff
- Make sure that regulation applies to all children's services, including outside school hours care, family day care, home-based care and in-home care
- Review and strengthen quality assurance for children's services including evaluating the validity of the current national accreditation scheme
- Improve mechanisms for regulatory compliance and enforcement, including licensing for all services, with more frequent checks for those found in breach, and annual licensing visits by licensing officers with early childhood qualifications
- Implement a National Curriculum Framework for early education and care which recognises the importance of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills and the importance of relationships in children's learning

- Provide that all children in Australia have access to two years of early childhood education in integrated programs, supervised by early childhood trained teachers, prior to the start of formal schooling and provide support to children with a disability or developmental delays or showing behavioural issues

Workplace Action to Provide for Family Responsibilities

Governments should legislate to provide both paid and unpaid parental leave as follows:

- Provide 16 weeks paid maternity leave immediately, and within a decade raise this to 12 months
- Provide a further one year of unpaid parental leave including a statutory period for fathers which if not taken is forfeited
- Provide that parents can work part-time until their youngest child reaches the age of compulsory schooling with the right to return to full-time work as the child gets older. This includes parent's right to negotiate and vary total hours to meet the demands of a young family and to set hours including predictable start and finish times
- Provide paid leave to meet the needs of young children who are sick

Extra Support for Children Living in Poverty

- The Newstart Allowance should provide equal benefit to the parent as the Parenting Payment (not \$30 less)
- An additional one-off payment should be made in the first year to those on the Newstart Allowance to cover the costs of re-entering the workforce
- Set targets and provide expert assistance to support Indigenous children to get into preschool prior to the start of formal schooling

Provide Tax Benefits not Penalties to Parents with Young Children

- Improve equity in the tax system so that family income and number of children determines the amount of rebate, not the employment status of the spouse
- Review the system of payments to families so that those families reliant on regular payments do not accrue debt for miscalculating income

Conclusion

We believe that all these actions are achievable and would benefit Australia's children now and into the future. Australia must integrate our approaches through combining family policy, tax, income support childcare and early education. We need to build a comprehensive system that gives parents a real choice about the care of their babies and young children and not "leave families with young children.... to craft private solutions to problems that have high public implications." (Meyers and Gornick, 2003)

There is clear evidence that investment in the early years, by providing love, care and quality education for our young ones, improves the economic wellbeing of the country. As James Heckman of the University of Chicago states:

"Early advantages cumulate; so do early disadvantages. Later remediation of early deficits is costly... Redirecting additional funds toward the early years, before the start of traditional schooling, is a sound investment in the productivity and safety of our society."

He estimates that such investment achieves a 17% per annum return to the child and the society and argues that by the time the children are aged 40, society will be repaid many times over through reduced crime, welfare payments and higher tax revenue.

This is where both government and business can make a real impact on the current and future lives of our children. Quality childcare, improved family and work place policies, income support and tax reform must keep up with the challenges facing young families, or today's children will be left behind.

Above all, we must value the lives of our children, and the work of those who care for them. And if we truly value the lives of our babies and young children, the policy decisions will be easy to take. The solutions are there – successful examples of innovative policies and systems abound – experts in the field agree generally on the way forward. With the political will, Australia can create a warmer, stronger and more caring place for our youngest citizens.

