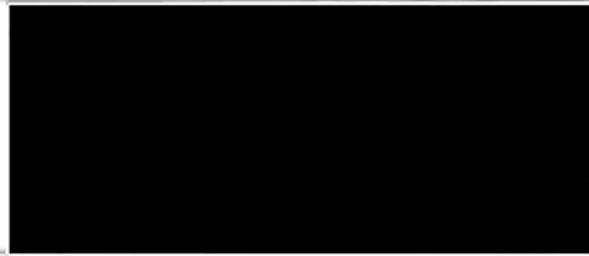


**IN THE MATTER OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION
INTO FAMILY VIOLENCE**

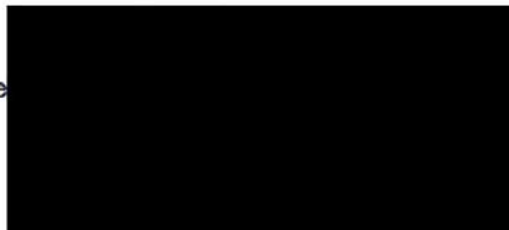
ATTACHMENT CK-1 TO STATEMENT OF CAROL ANN KELLY

Date of document: 30 September 2015
Filed on behalf of: State of Victoria
Prepared by:
Victorian Government Solicitor's Office
Level 39
80 Collins Street
Melbourne VIC 3000



This is the attachment marked 'CK-1' produced and shown to **CAROL ANN KELLY** at the time of signing her statement on 30 September 2015.

Before me



**An Australian legal practitioner
within the meaning of the
Legal Profession Uniform Law (Victoria)**

Attachment CK-1

THE EDUCATION STATE

Early Childhood
Consultation Paper



Published by the Department of
Education and Training

Melbourne
August 2015

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Victoria, 3002.
ISBN 978-0-7594-0799-2

ACCESSIBILITY

This document is also available on the internet at:
education.state.education.vic.gov.au

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MINISTER'S MESSAGE

The Andrews Labor Government is making Victoria the Education State. This begins with giving every child a strong start in life.

Children are born ready to learn – they are naturally inquisitive about their world. Their learning and curiosity starts at home, with parents being the first nurturers and teachers.

Our children's early health, education and care before they turn five set them up for the rest of their lives, shaping their happiness, wellbeing and success.

We don't just know this intuitively. It's backed up by hard evidence.

Economic research definitively shows that the most cost-effective way to improve the skills and capabilities that our economy and society are built on is to support young children, particularly those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable.

Early childhood is the best time to transform a person's life. This is the time when a child's potential – their imagination, curiosity and creative spark – is first nurtured. Effort and investment well spent during our children's early years repay themselves many times over – in better lives and in fairer, more prosperous societies.

This is why strengthening the early childhood sector is everyone's business – from parents who want the best for their children, to doctors, nurses, educators, social workers and police, through to employers, industry and, of course, governments.

Victorian early childhood educators and nurses are doing great work with families to create highly effective services and supports.

But we can do even better. The Andrews Labor Government is committed to transforming early childhood health, development and learning in this state.

We want to work with professionals, parents, caregivers, academics, experts and the broader Victorian community to develop substantial reforms, to be put into action year by year over the coming decade.

The conversation has already begun about our shared vision for the Education State and for our schools. Now we want to continue the conversation, focusing on the early childhood years. We want to hear about your experiences with early childhood services in Victoria, and your ideas for what a truly outstanding system would look like.

In the Education State, we want excellence – in outcomes and services – for every child. We want the success that is available to many to be the success that's guaranteed for all. What we do collectively to support young children and their families will lay the foundation for a bright future for all Victorians.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jenny Mikakos".

Jenny Mikakos MP
Minister for Families and Children

OUR COMMITMENT

Early childhood development is at the heart of the Victorian Government's vision for the Education State. The government has mapped out the first steps to transforming Victoria's early childhood services.

We are **improving Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services:**

- We have established a Principal MCH Nurse position to provide expert advice on children's health and development, and to lead the sector.
- We have invested \$950,000 to fund innovative and collaborative MCH practice, in particular to support vulnerable families.

We are **supporting parents and children:**

- We are investing \$9 million in specialised, tailored support for children with disabilities or developmental delays before they start school.
- We have provided \$50,000 in seed funding for new community playgroups.

We are **enhancing early childhood education and care services:**

- We are providing \$50 million to build and upgrade kindergartens and children's hubs to meet the demands of Victoria's growing population and deliver more integrated services for families.

- We are delivering up to \$83.7 million to support kindergarten services' improved educator-to-child ratios in 2016, which will allow for more effective and meaningful relationships with children.
- We have secured two more years of funding from the Commonwealth Government for 15 hours of four-year-old kindergarten per week. We will continue working to secure ongoing federal investment to provide certainty to parents and kindergarten teachers and educators.
- We will keep speaking up for Victorians in the national childcare debate, and work to move the discussion beyond whether care is more important than learning. Children's brains are developing from birth; they are learning in every setting. Workforce participation need not come at the expense of quality learning for children.
- We are committed to the National Quality Framework (NQF) as a driver for improving quality and outcomes for children.

OUR VISION FOR THE EDUCATION STATE

All Victorians are encouraged to have their say on how we build the Education State.

Discussions have been held state-wide with students, parents, caregivers, teachers and businesses about what our State could achieve, and how we could work differently to achieve it. These conversations have considered the education system as a whole – from infancy to school and adult training. In these discussions, the messages concerning early childhood have been clear.

We have heard that Victoria must:

- focus more on early childhood as the foundation for lifelong wellbeing and learning
- support parents as strong partners in their children's education
- increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in three- and four-year-old kindergarten programs
- support our early childhood educators with high-quality training and development opportunities
- better connect our early childhood services
- improve the transition from kindergarten to school for children and families.

We have heard your views on what matters, what is working, and what we could build on and do differently. Now we are focusing on what we need to do together to achieve the best for Victoria's young children.

WHAT HAVE WE HEARD

"We believe that if, as a State, we can get the policy settings right, early childhood education and care provides the opportunity to fast-track Victoria to becoming the Education State."¹

"Supporting parents involved in their child's learning from birth through to adulthood helps students achieve their best possible educational outcomes. There is strong evidence that parental engagement has a significant effect on children's educational achievement, even when controlling for other factors such as socio-economic status and parent education levels."²

"Genuine collaboration and engagement with the local Aboriginal community is needed to ensure programs and services are responsive to need and maintain cultural awareness and sensitivity when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and their families."³

"It is vital that we improve educator training so that educators are better equipped to identify learning and development problems, to know how to support children with different learning and development needs, and to know where to seek additional support when required."⁴

"We need to ensure that our services and systems don't close the door on vulnerable young people but instead that we continually find ways to open new doors and keep them open."⁵

"A successful transition to school results in children who like school, look forward to going each day, and show steady growth in academic and social skills. Successful transitions are also more likely to lead to families being actively involved in their children's education, as well as educators and families valuing each other."⁶

WHY DOES EARLY CHILDHOOD MATTER?

Neuroscience provides compelling evidence that the first years of life are crucial to brain development, and that a child's early experiences have long-term effects.

There is also academic consensus that a loving, healthy and intellectually stimulating early childhood – from infancy to kindergarten and starting school – is critical to a person's wellbeing and success throughout their life. The brain has the greatest capacity for change during these early years, making this a period of both opportunity and vulnerability.

This explains why children who have a strong start in life are more likely to do well academically and socially as they grow older. Conversely, young children who miss out on positive experiences with parents, caregivers and educators are much more likely to have to struggle to catch up.

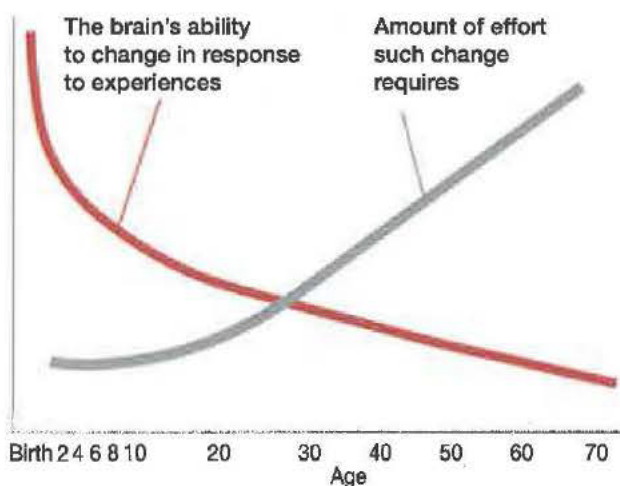
We know, for example, that children who miss out on kindergarten are more likely to start behind at school. These children are less likely to reach the minimum standards in

Year 3 NAPLAN tests, and are more likely to continue to lag behind their schoolmates in later years.

It is more effective, and less costly, to support children's development during their early years than it is to try to intervene or "fix" issues at an older age.⁷

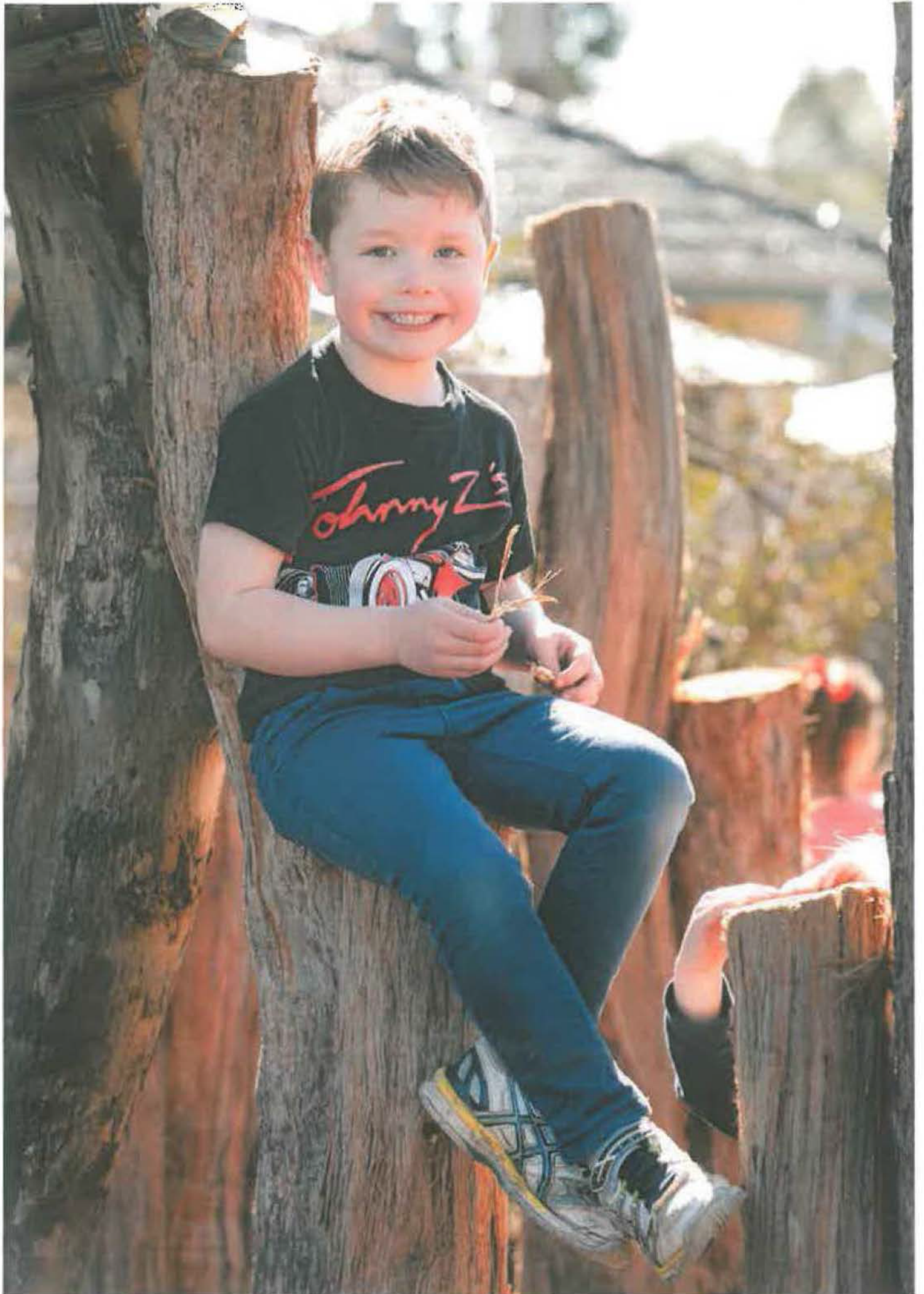
A child's development can be thought of as a scale, tipping towards either positive or negative development. Positive factors, such as supportive relationships and strong learning opportunities, are stacked on one side, with negative factors, such as abuse, neglect, violence and a lack of resources, on the other.

Our goal is to tip the development scale for all Victorian children to the positive side. We will do this by supporting parents and families as the central players in children's lives, by supporting maternal and child health and development, and by ensuring all children benefit from excellent early childhood education and care.



Source: Pat Levitt (2009)

Studies show that every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education returns \$1.50 to nearly \$3. The return grows to double digits for children from disadvantaged families.⁸



OUR SERVICES

For children aged 0–5, a range of early childhood services exist in Victoria, as shown in the diagram below. These services include a range of health and wellbeing programs alongside education and care services. The services can be universal – available to everyone – or targeted to the children and families who need extra assistance.

All three levels of government contribute funding towards these services. Local governments invest in, plan for and deliver a range of early childhood development services. Both the Victorian and Commonwealth governments contribute funding and monitor quality (setting policy, standards and regulation).

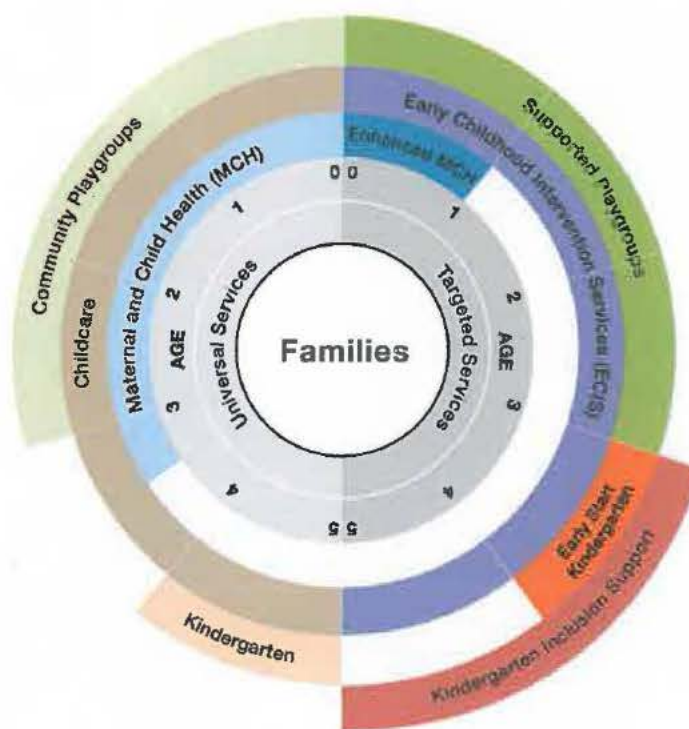
Delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher in a range of settings. 600 hours (15 hours per week) in the year before school.

6.75 hours over 3.5 years. 10 Key Ages and Stages visits with a qualified nurse to discuss parenting and optimising children’s health, growth, learning and development.

Parents meet and share parenting skills and experiences, and children learn and develop through play.

Centre-based care, family care and occasional care services. In some centres kindergarten programs (funded by the Victorian Government) are delivered in a long day care service (funded by the Commonwealth).

KEY EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES IN VICTORIA*



*Note: The services depicted are not an exclusive list of all Victorian Government services for children. Note also that the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services provides a range of targeted services to support vulnerable children and families, such as Child FIRST, Child Protection and community health services.

Free or low-cost kindergarten program in the two years before school for three-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children known to Child Protection, with a qualified early childhood teacher. 600 hours (15 hours per week).

Provides a more intense level of MCH support to children and families at risk of poor outcomes. 15 hours for one year for 10 per cent of all families accessing MCH.

Support to funded kindergartens to build their capacity to maximise the learning of children with disabilities or additional needs (i.e. kindergarten in year before school and Early Start Kindergarten).

Engages disadvantaged families and promotes health, learning and development outcomes for children.

Supports children with a disability or developmental delay and their families.



HOW IS VICTORIA PERFORMING?

Victoria has a proud history of delivering innovative early childhood services and programs, and our young children achieve some of the best outcomes nation-wide.

But our community is changing. Victoria's birth rate has increased significantly over the past decade, and it continues to climb, with more than 400,000 children now aged five or younger.

The needs of families are also changing. More women are joining or returning to the paid workforce than in the past. Our early childhood services are changing in response. Over the past five years, the proportion of kindergarten programs delivered in a long day care setting has increased by approximately one third, providing more support for working parents while maximising learning and development outcomes for children prior to school. Some local governments are offering MCH services on weekends and in more accessible locations, such as shopping centres.

We can, however, do even better in giving Victorian children the head start they need in an increasingly complex and economically competitive world.

OUR STRENGTHS

- Compared to other states, Victoria has the smallest proportion of developmentally vulnerable children in the first year of school (measured by the 2012 Australian Early Development Census).
- Year 3 NAPLAN results show that Victoria has the smallest proportion of children below the national minimum standard in key areas; for example, reading and numeracy (2014 NAPLAN results).
- In 2014, there was 100 per cent participation in an initial home visit by MCH nurses, who support the wellbeing of mothers and newborns.
- 96.4 per cent of Victorian children attend kindergarten in the year before school, which is critical to boosting children's learning and development outcomes.
- Over recent years, more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have been using early childhood services. Fewer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents are noticing health or development issues with their children, with rates decreasing slightly since 2011.⁹
- In Victoria, four out of five early childhood education and care services currently "meet" or "exceed" the requirements of the National Quality Framework, a greater proportion than any other State or Territory.



OUR CHALLENGES

- In Victoria, one in five children is developmentally vulnerable when they start school (measured by the 2012 Australian Early Development Census).
- Approximately one in eight children has behavioural issues when they start school (as at 2014).
- Participation rates in the MCH Key Ages and Stages visits begin to reduce from the eight-month to the 3.5 year visit. This increases the risk of health and development problems (for example, with communication skills) not being identified early. In 2014, a third of families did not attend this last visit, while half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children missed out.
- One in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is missing out on kindergarten in the year before school.
- Only 15 per cent of eligible children known to Child Protection and 37 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessed the targeted kindergarten program available for vulnerable three-year-olds in 2014.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

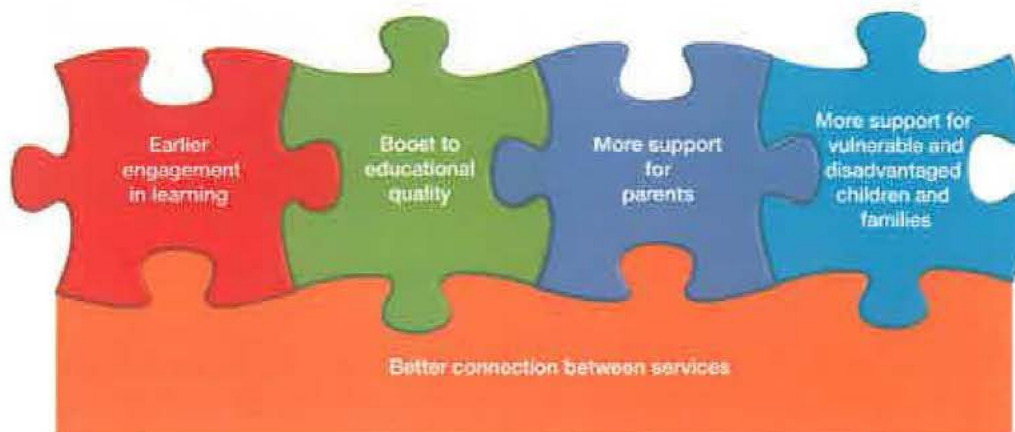
- What are the most important early childhood development outcomes, and why? How should we be measuring success?
- What are your positive experiences of early childhood services? Have you had any negative or unhelpful experiences?
- Looking at the Victorian early childhood system as a whole, what are our strengths, weaknesses and gaps?



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

If Victoria is to become a world leader in early childhood learning and development, we need to make clear decisions about what needs to change, and how to prioritise those changes.

We have proposed five areas of reform to build on our strengths and respond to the challenges before us. These reform areas are intended to provoke discussion about how best to achieve excellent outcomes for all Victorian children.



DISCUSSION STARTERS

- Are the challenges we face addressed by these areas of reform?
- Which of these reforms do you think are the most important, and why?
- Are there other areas that we should be focusing on?



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE: EARLIER ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

What we know

The brain is a work in progress, with cognitive development spanning our entire lives. However, the brain's executive and self-regulation functions – that is, our working memory, mental flexibility and capacity for self-control – are largely developed before we turn five.¹⁰

Enhancing educational opportunities and creating rich learning environments for young children during these vital years pay dividends. A recent study found that the direct effects of a child attending kindergarten is equivalent to 10–20 NAPLAN points, or 15–20 weeks of school in Year 3.¹¹

We have seen similar results reproduced internationally. Research from the United Kingdom (UK) shows that two years of high-quality early childhood education provides the same protective effect as having a tertiary-educated mother.¹²

What we are doing

Victoria has a highly successful kindergarten program for children in the year before school, with more than 96 per cent of children attending. We are working to get this number even higher.

There is no "universal" kindergarten service in Victoria for three-year-old children. Accurate information is difficult to gather, but our best estimates are that about one-third of Victorian three-year-olds attend a kindergarten program, with an average enrolment of five hours per week. One-third of three-year-olds are not enrolled in a formal early childhood education and care program, and the remaining third participate in some other type of formal care.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- What are the priorities for this area of reform, and why?
- What is your experience of kindergarten programs, as a parent or educator?
- What do you think children need at different ages to thrive? How does this vary from child to child?
- How can we better meet the needs of all children to participate in good-quality early learning?
- What role should government, the community or parents play in investing in learning for children at a young age? Should these roles be different depending on whether the family is disadvantaged or vulnerable?

What we could do better

Kindergarten attendance varies across communities and cohorts. For example, one in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children does not attend kindergarten in the year before school.

We provide targeted funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children known to Child Protection to attend 15 hours of three-year-old kindergarten at no cost. Only 15 per cent of eligible children known to Child Protection and 37 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessed this program in 2014.

Other countries, such as the UK, have moved to extend their kindergarten programs – either to younger children or by increasing the number of hours on offer.¹³ The key questions are what can we learn from our successful four-year-old kindergarten program, and from successful reforms abroad.



INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDIES

United Kingdom

Reforms rolled out in the UK since 1997 have given families financial assistance to help meet the cost of education and care. The government has also introduced targeted funding, designed to address the needs of children and families in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.¹⁴

In 2010, all three- and four-year-olds in the UK became entitled to 15 hours a week of state-funded education and care. Now 96 per cent of children in these age groups receive early years education and care at no cost. From 2014, the entitlement to 15 hours of free education and care per week was extended to approximately 40 per cent of the UK's most disadvantaged two-year-olds. Recently, the UK Government committed to providing 15 to 30 hours of free childcare for working families.¹⁵

Ontario, Canada

In 2010, Ontario introduced a full-day, play-based kindergarten service for four- and five-year-olds, phased in across five years.

Children attend kindergarten, delivered in a school setting, from Monday to Friday. The play-based curriculum promotes engagement and self-regulation in young children. Ontario takes a team-teaching approach to instruction, involving a certified teacher and an early childhood educator in each class of at least 16 students. This program provides extended care in the school setting to make transitions for young children easier.¹⁶



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE: A BOOST TO EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

What we know

Research shows us that it's not just when and how much children engage in education that matters; it's also the quality of that education. As with schooling, good-quality early childhood education and care is linked to strong outcomes for children's wellbeing and learning.¹⁷

We also know that skilful educators who can create rich learning environments, stimulating interactions with and between children, have a significant positive impact,¹⁸ and that educators with higher qualifications are strongly associated with our children's success.

What we are doing

Victoria has a robust system in place to monitor our children's services to ensure they meet a high standard. We currently regulate approximately 4,000 approved education and care services and 450 licensed children's services under the *Education and Care Services National Law (Vic) 2010* and *Children's Services Act 1996*, respectively.

In Victoria, four out of five early childhood education and care services currently "meet" or "exceed" the requirements of the National Quality Framework, a greater proportion than in any other state or territory.

The National Quality Framework is a national system for the regulation and quality assessment of early childhood education and care services.

From 30 September 2015, all early childhood educators will be required to register with the Victorian Institute of Teaching. This recognises early childhood educators as the qualified professionals they are. This also assures families that consistent, high-quality standards of practice are in place for the benefit of their children.

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, introduced in 2010, provides early childhood education professionals with a common teaching framework to support quality practice. It will be strengthened and revised in 2015, bringing it up to date with the latest evidence-based research.

A number of initiatives are currently available to support the early childhood professional educator workforce. For example, we offer scholarships to upgrade or attain an early childhood qualification, incentives to support services to attract qualified professionals to hard-to-staff locations, and professional development to build leadership skills and educational practice through the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership.

What we could do better

One in five Victorian services needs to improve to meet our national quality minimum standards. The quality area that services struggle with most is "educational program and practice", which is vital for children's learning outcomes.

A 2013 study found that while Australian kindergartens rated slightly better in the areas of classroom organisation and instructional support, overall scores averaged in the low-to-medium range when compared internationally.¹⁹



Quality is an issue for all communities and all parents. While there are high-quality providers across all types of early childhood education and care services, the average level of quality varies across different service types. In 2014, stand-alone kindergartens were the strongest performers, with 87 per cent meeting or exceeding the national standards, compared to 75 per cent of long day care services and 55 per cent of family day care services.

We also know that it can be difficult for parents to grapple with quality concerns relating to their child's early childhood education and care service. The National Quality Framework ratings are not widely known or understood. In many cases, parents' choices are also constrained by factors such as the availability of a service close to home, the suitability of the hours, or the limited number of places on offer – all of which may make it hard to change services. Add to this the emotions that many parents feel when their child starts at a centre or family day care service, and it is easy to see why families feel invested in a particular provider, even if it is not meeting quality standards.

The challenge for Victoria is to find effective ways to lift quality, particularly in educational practice, that build on what we are already doing. This might mean a new approach to supporting and developing our valued educators, in collaboration with the profession, services and other levels of government. It might also mean complementing the current National Quality Standards with more information about children's outcomes, being even more careful about who we allow to set up an early childhood education and care service, and better informing parents about the importance of quality.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- What are the priorities in this area of reform, and why?
- As a parent, what do you look for in determining the quality of an early childhood education and care service?
- As a parent, which factors did you take into consideration when choosing your early childhood service? For example, location, access, quality, service model, facility, program, staff, time of session (that is, did you feel as though you had a choice?).
- As an early learning professional, what's your experience of the quality of early childhood education and care services? What makes it easier or harder for you to deliver high-quality education?
- What can government, service providers and early childhood educators do more of, or do differently, to improve the quality of early childhood education?



LOCAL CASE STUDY

Excellent rated service – Clarendon Children's Centre

Clarendon Children's Centre was awarded an "excellent" National Quality Standard rating in 2015. The rating recognises exceptional practice, and promotes the value of high-quality education and care. It is the highest quality rating an education and care service can achieve.

Educators at Clarendon Children's Centre encourage inquiry-based learning, which is guided by children's own interests – such as a child's curiosity about plants leading to a group excursion to a community garden.

Clarendon Children's Centre has also made changes to be more inclusive. It has adapted the physical environment and provided specialist support to build the skills of its educators allowing children with hearing difficulties to thrive in the program.

The centre holds a great level of respect for the skills and professionalism of its educators. Educators at all levels are given the opportunity to take on leadership roles, with support offered through professional development that's tailored to individual needs, interest and professional goals.



LOCAL CASE STUDY

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) tool

Across the world, a range of reflective assessment tools and resources to promote effective teacher practice have been developed and implemented.

One tool, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), developed by the University of Virginia, measures three broad domains of educator effectiveness: emotional support, classroom organisation and instructional support. It gives educators a way to see whether their teaching methods are working and to what degree.

The University of Virginia's CLASS tool includes observations of educators and children by a certified CLASS observer. The tool helps educators to engage in critical reflection and builds awareness of their own practices to hone their skills, continually improve and focus both on effective teacher practice and the quality of relationships essential to the learning process.

In Victoria, the CLASS tool has been used in longitudinal studies and research such as E4Kids, in pre-service training at Melbourne University, and introduced at in-service training at the Bastow Institute focused on leading educational practice.

Early childhood professionals have highlighted that:

"CLASS has opened my eyes in the way I may interact or communicate with the children, and I have taken the time to sit back, observe and allow children to come up with ideas before adding my two cents' worth."

"I've loved the CLASS document. It has helped me with practical questions and ideas to reflect on my practice and how I can improve and support others."



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE: MORE SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

What we know

Parents and carers play the central role in supporting a child's wellbeing and learning – by providing a loving, responsive and intellectually stimulating environment. A child's home learning environment and the quality of their relationships with parents and caregivers have the strongest and most durable effects on their development.²⁰ For example, research has shown there is a direct causal link between reading to young children and their doing well in school.²¹

Numerous studies show the benefits of positive parenting techniques for the entire family – including fewer behavioural and emotional problems in children, and better mental health for parents.²²

Supporting parents with their children can also reduce the risk of child physical abuse.²³ A review undertaken by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse identified a number of education programs that have improved parents' skills and addressed risk factors for child abuse and neglect.²⁴

What we are doing

In Victoria, expectant parents have access to antenatal services prior to their child's birth. Parents are also entitled to ten visits with a highly qualified MCH nurse from the time their child is born until when they are three and a half. These visits support positive parenting and the physical and mental health of families. They play an important role in identifying family violence and at-risk children, and in referring these families to specialist services. In addition to the universal service, there is also an enhanced MCH service for vulnerable families. There is also a 24-hour MCH helpline available to all families.

Community and supported playgroups across Victoria allow thousands of parents to come together with their babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers to meet other people going through similar experiences, and find out about the support available in their community.

Victoria also provides support through the state-wide "Parentline" telephone counselling service to parents and carers of children aged under 18 years.

What we could do better

Parenting is joyful, but often challenging. Supporting Victorian parents and caregivers, particularly those who are struggling, to make their job easier is critical to improving children's outcomes. We need to think about how to make the most of the good work already happening, in order to ensure that getting the support parents need is simple, and that the advice is practical and useful.

We recognise that parents and caregivers need more accessible support in Victoria, and that the great services we already have in place offer a solid base to build on. It is important that these support services are available to parents and caregivers if they are needed, and that they continue until they are no longer needed.

These services also need to connect parents to more formal family support services where necessary, incorporating people's roles as parents and carers into any adult support services they might be receiving.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- What do you think are the priorities for supporting parents, and why?
- As a parent, what are your experiences of services that support parenting? How easy were they to access? Was there a time when you needed more parenting support than was on offer?
- As a professional working with parents, what are the highlights and challenges of your role?
- What can government, services and professionals do differently to better support positive parenting that nurtures children and supports their health, wellbeing, learning and development?



LOCAL CASE STUDY

Supported playgroups

Supported playgroups are targeted to disadvantaged families who would not otherwise participate in a playgroup, and whose children are at risk of poor developmental outcomes. The Victorian Government currently funds supported playgroups in 35 out of 79 local government areas.

Supported playgroups help parents learn positive ways to interact with their children that promote their social, emotional and cognitive development. Parents develop friendships in the supported playgroups, develop social support networks and learn from other parents about services in their community.

In comparison to community playgroups, supported playgroups are led by a facilitator with qualifications in early childhood or community services who helps parents join the group and encourages their ongoing participation. Families can start off apprehensive but grow to trust their facilitator and feel welcomed by and committed to the playgroup. The facilitator also works with parents individually and in groups to provide high-quality play and learning experiences for the children and parents, many of which can be and are encouraged to be replicated at home.

In addition, in 2016, the implementation of the *smalltalk* program in all supported playgroups will help parents to create stimulating home learning environments. *smalltalk* shows parents how everyday interactions, such as reading and talking, can significantly enhance their child's speech and language skills. In practice, *smalltalk* involves facilitators working in partnership with parents to explain the importance of their everyday interactions with their children. Facilitators encourage warm and gentle interaction, tuning into children's emotional cues, following children's leads, listening and talking more, and reading to children every day. Facilitators talk with parents about children's development, model high-quality interactions and provide encouragement and individual constructive feedback. *smalltalk* will be delivered in either a group setting or in the family home.



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE: MORE SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE AND DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

What we know

Left unaddressed, vulnerability and disadvantage can severely reduce a child's chances of living a fulfilling, healthy and productive life, with knock-on effects on social, health and justice services, and GDP.²⁵ Nobel laureate James Heckman found the rate of return for investment in quality early childhood development for disadvantaged children is 7–10 per cent per annum through better outcomes in education, health, sociability, economic productivity and reduced crime.

Effective early childhood services help support vulnerable and disadvantaged children in a seamless, sustained way. The best systems include strong universal services that respond to children in line with their needs, targeted services that rapidly respond to children's needs as they emerge, and intensive support for the children who need it most.²⁶

What we are doing

The Victorian Government provides a range of targeted programs for vulnerable and disadvantaged young children.

Additional supports are provided for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families through the Enhanced

In August 2015, the Minister for Families and Children announced the *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children*. This project, led by the Department of Health & Human Services, will develop a roadmap to shape the long-term reform of the support service system for vulnerable children and families. It will look at services and programs with the aim of intervening early to prevent abuse and neglect; keeping more families together through crisis; and securing better futures for children who can't live at home.

More information is available at www.dhs.vic.gov.au

MCH service (birth to 12 months old for 10 per cent of all families accessing MCH), supported playgroups, and targeted access and support for kindergarten. Children with a disability or developmental delay are supported through Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS), as well as through four-year-old kindergarten programs.

What we could do better

One in five Victorian children is developmentally vulnerable when they start school, putting them at increased risk of poor outcomes for health, wellbeing and learning. There is also the much more immediate and acute vulnerability of being at risk of significant harm, including abuse and neglect.

While children from all backgrounds can be vulnerable, and families can move in and out of vulnerability as their circumstances change, some children are more at risk than



others. This includes children who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, those with a disability or developmental delay, those from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, those who have recently arrived in Australia, and those experiencing family violence, mental health, and drug and alcohol issues.

There are close to 10,000 children aged under five receiving child protection services in Victoria and almost 2,000 in out-of-home care. There also continue to be significant differences in children's outcomes for those whose families are in the lowest socio-economic bracket compared to the highest. In some communities, this disadvantage is widespread and entrenched.²⁷

Currently, those who are most vulnerable and/or disadvantaged are those least likely to participate in our universal early childhood services. This means those who most need the support our universal services offer are those least likely to receive it. Our early childhood workforce also needs to feel supported and equipped to provide for the complex needs of these children and families.

The challenge for Victoria is that the current system of supports for vulnerable and disadvantaged children is complex and split across multiple programs and services. Eligibility for additional support is often based on age, rather than need. It is important that key services are available to vulnerable and disadvantaged families where they are required and for as long as they are required. We need to identify where services are failing to connect with each other, or don't provide the right service at the right time, and why that is happening.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- What do you think are the priorities in this reform area, and why?
- What is your experience of services designed to help vulnerable or disadvantaged families, as someone who received a service or as a professional providing the service?
- What can government, the community sector, services and parents do more of, or do differently, to support vulnerable and disadvantaged children to have strong health, wellbeing, learning and development outcomes?



LOCAL CASE STUDY

right@home: A randomised controlled trial

The right@home trial seeks to determine whether a sustained, nurse home-visiting program (of at least 25 home visits) offered to Australian mothers from the antenatal period to when the child is two years, improves parenting, the home environment and outcomes for children. right@home builds on the small-scale Miller Early Childhood Sustained Home Visiting (MECSH) program, which was conducted in a single, socio-economically disadvantaged suburb in greater Sydney, and resulted in a more supportive home environment for children.

right@home aims to strengthen parent–child relationships, and in turn encourages a positive early learning environment to improve child outcomes. It also aims to connect these families to the community. Any given visit has a different focus or covers different activities. For example, it may discuss nutrition, how to support regular sleep patterns, how to keep the home safe for children, promoting the parents' relationship with the child, or encouraging children's learning at home. The nurses will support the mothers' and families' health and wellbeing.

Similar models have been used in the United States and have shown significant cost-benefits through improved prenatal health, improved maternal employment, reduction of longer-term reliance on social services, and reduced juvenile delinquency and criminal activity. For example, the Nurse Family Partnership model (the original model developed in the US by Dr David Olds) showed a net benefit to society of up to US\$34,148 per family served, which equates to up to a \$5.70 return on every dollar invested, with the bulk of the savings accruing to government.²⁸

In Australia, the right@home trial is being conducted in five sites in Victoria and Tasmania, including Whittlesea, Frankston/Dandenong and Ballarat. There are 772 families participating. Families were recruited antenatally to identify those who might benefit most from the extra support offered by right@home. Risk factors considered include physical and mental health, and social circumstances.

The right@home trial is a research collaboration between Alliance for Children and Youth, the Centre for Community Child Health, and the Centre for Health Equity Training Research and Evaluation.



LOCAL CASE STUDY

Access to Early Learning

Sarah and her three-year-old son Max* were referred to the Access to Early Learning (AEL) program, run by the local council, by their MCH nurse. Sarah was concerned about Max's development, but was reluctant to work with services given her history with Child Protection.

The AEL key facilitation worker, Jeanette, arranged to meet Sarah and Max at a facilitated playgroup that Jeanette was leading. Sarah built trust in Jeanette, and began to discuss other areas of life that were impacting on the family. This paved the way for Jeanette to introduce the Family and In-home Learning Support worker, Michelle.

Michelle reconnected Sarah with the mental health service that had worked with her in the past regarding her long-term treatment plan. Michelle also contacted a housing service to deal with the family's accommodation issues. Michelle introduced low-cost play materials into the home to promote a stimulating learning environment for Max, and support Sarah's role as her child's first teacher. This prepared Max for participation in kindergarten.

Jeanette and Sarah discussed Max's educational needs, and Jeanette connected with a local early childhood service she knew would suit Max. Jeanette was able to support the family to access one day a week in an integrated long day care service with a kindergarten program provided by a qualified teacher.

Jeanette and Michelle worked together to support Sarah in working through her fears about accessing the early childhood service. This included visiting the service together, completing enrolment materials together, identifying situations that may trigger Sarah's trauma and organising access to the Special Child Care Benefit to ease the financial burden. Jeanette drew on her early childhood expertise to provide targeted information and advice to the early childhood staff about Sarah and Max's needs. This helped the early childhood service develop an Individual Learning Plan for Max. The program was supported by in-home learning strategies and routine for consistency. This coordinated approach assisted in promoting Max's language, toilet training and enhanced social skills.

Over the course of a year, Max's development progressed significantly, including speech and language, improved social skills and increased cognitive development. Max also made many new friends, which has resulted in Sarah forming supportive connections with other parents. Sarah has continued to access supports, has a growing sense of confidence in her parenting and has re-entered the workforce.

**not their real names*



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE: BETTER CONNECTION BETWEEN SERVICES

What we know

The birth rate in Victoria is increasing, and so is demand for early childhood services. At the same time, the nature of that demand is shifting. All families need access to high-quality services that are easy to use, and that respond to their needs. Some families require a range of well-connected additional services to help with complex needs.

A happy and healthy childhood is the result of a combined effort by families, communities and services. Better connected, integrated and flexible services will ensure all families are engaged with the right services to help them achieve the best outcomes for their children; for example, the importance of outreach and stronger integration between MCH and other specialist services.

We know that how well a child is developing depends on a range of interconnected factors, including child and adult education, family functioning, health and wellbeing, and housing. How families access the services that support these factors should be central to how governments plan for the future. We know that families want services that have been designed around their needs and the pressures they face, rather than families having to fit in with an inflexible system.

What we are doing

State and Commonwealth governments have worked together to introduce common quality standards via the National Quality Framework, and make kindergarten available in long day care settings. Some Councils are offering a central

enrolment system for kindergarten that prioritises access for vulnerable children (41 out of 79 local government areas).

Through the Children and Youth Area Partnerships, government departments, service providers and communities are aligning services that will make the biggest difference to vulnerable children and families in their area. This is currently operating in eight sites across Victoria.

The *Transition: A Positive Start to School Initiative* has been making the transition from kindergarten to school easier for children and their families since it was introduced in 2009. To keep improving these experiences for Victorian children and families, we have started a consultation process, coupled with advice from researchers, academics, parents and educators, which will result in an updated Transition Kit and better resources and professional development opportunities in 2016.

In addition, work is underway to bring together existing early childhood data systems. This will develop an integrated, client-level information system to better support service engagement and sustained participation for disadvantaged and vulnerable children in early childhood services, and enable more accurate and timely responses to changing family needs.

What we could do better

Administrative requirements and funding arrangements differ between local governments, the State Government and the Commonwealth Government, and this can create problems for families and children. As can differing priorities: the current Commonwealth Government has been focused on ensuring parents' workforce participation, while the states have had a greater emphasis on child development and education. This has reinforced a "care versus learning" distinction.



All governments tend to focus on individual programs rather than children's outcomes. Children's and families' needs are often complex and require an overarching, integrated approach; however, programs are often designed to address single issues.

There is also a need for better information-sharing about children's participation and outcomes, particularly for the first three years of their lives.

These issues mean that:

- types of services and how accessible they are can vary from place to place
- it is more difficult to identify when children are at risk and intervene earlier with the right kind of support
- transitions between important points in a child's life – such as between MCH, kindergarten and school – are more difficult than they need to be
- innovation and cross-organisation thinking is not happening as much as it could or should be.

These problems impact more on vulnerable and disadvantaged families.

The system needs to work to meet the needs of families, instead of families doing the work to meet the requirements of the system. We need to build new, robust partnerships – with communities and between different departments and levels of government – to provide people with the well-connected, effective and convenient services they need

and deserve. This might mean improving local planning and governance, bringing services together more (perhaps physically and certainly professionally) and supporting better sharing of information between services.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- What do you think are the priorities for better connecting, integrating and funding services, and why?
- What are your experiences of services that have been effective in joining together to improve the outcomes for a child?
- What can government, services and professionals do differently to better connect and integrate services? What are the key barriers and enablers?
- Each level of government is involved in funding, delivering or regulating early childhood services. How could they work better together to ensure the delivery and effectiveness of these services?
- How can government improve connectedness and transitions across all stages of the education service system – early childhood, schools and tertiary education?



INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY

Sweden

In Sweden, key services accessed by families are provided under the one roof.

Family centres – known as “*Familjecentraler*” – were formally established in Sweden in 2000. These provide universal, voluntary and free-of-charge services under one roof, covering maternity and child healthcare, pre-school education and social welfare services. They involve multi-agency professional staff, including midwives, paediatric nurses, paediatricians, pre-school teachers, social workers and psychologists. These family centres have been designed to be highly accessible, with the availability of services aimed at reducing social inequalities. A 2009 evaluation of family centres described them as “a low-risk investment”, benefitting both visitors and staff.

Sweden has the lowest global maternal and child mortality rates. Its maternal healthcare system is regulated at a national level; ongoing services are offered to every woman at no cost by registered midwives at municipal clinics. Children have access to 20 visits in the first 18 months of life. Midwives and nurses in the child health service also run parenting courses.

Parenting support provided by public social services includes individual support for mothers during pregnancy as well as family peer groups. Children’s social welfare and healthcare professionals organise themselves in teams and provide counselling to families through family centres.



LOCAL CASE STUDY

Linking Learning project – Warracknabeal Oral Reading Development Strategy (WORDS)

In Warracknabeal, schools, the kindergarten, the Maternal and Child Health centre, the Local Learning and Employment Network, the library, businesses and community groups are keen to improve literacy levels, especially of vulnerable children. All are working together with the support of a strong volunteer base.

The WORDS program includes volunteers who go to wherever children and families gather:

- Year 10 students in the Reader Leader program work one to one with children in the kindergarten, Warracknabeal Primary School, St Mary's Primary School and at the Warracknabeal Special Development School.
- Community volunteers hold reading sessions for children and families in the waiting rooms of the MCH centre during immunisation sessions, in the local pharmacy or at the local park.

Simple tips for parents on how to share books with their children in an age-appropriate and enjoyable way are displayed prominently around the town on posters, on book collection wheelie bins/pop-up library boxes and inside book covers.

Donations of picture books have been sought from everyone in the town, and families are borrowing books from the pop-up library boxes to read with their children and return when and where convenient.

There is also anecdotal evidence that even when reading sessions are not being run, parents are reading to their children while they wait to see the MCH nurse or at the chemist.

A STATE-WIDE DISCUSSION

This document and the questions in it are part of an ongoing discussion across the Victorian community to develop a vision for the Education State. Establishing Victoria as the Education State will require the most inspired thinking, using local and global knowledge about the best ways to improve early childhood development, to make sure all Victoria's young children have a great start in life.

Tapping into your experiences and expertise, we will be able to collectively determine what Victoria can and should achieve over the next ten years. Throughout August and

September, we will be running a series of consultation forums in which we will be asking the sector, parents and caregivers, academics, experts and the broader Victorian community to share their views.

It is vital that we all have an opportunity to say what we think it will take to make Victoria the Education State.

To register for the consultation opportunities, or to join the conversation online, go to **educationstate.education.vic.gov.au**

Footnotes

- ¹ Early Childhood Management Services
- ² Victorian Council of Social Service
- ³ Victorian Council of Social Service
- ⁴ Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), Murdoch Children's Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne
- ⁵ The Salvation Army, Victoria State Council, Australian Southern Territory
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- ²³ Cummins, P., Scott, D. & Scales, B. (2012), *Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry'*
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- ²⁶ The Centre for Community Child Health (2006), *Services for young children and families: an integrated approach*
- ²⁷ Jesuit Social Services & Catholic Social Services Australia (2007), *Dropping off the edge*
- ²⁸ RAND Corporation 2005

