

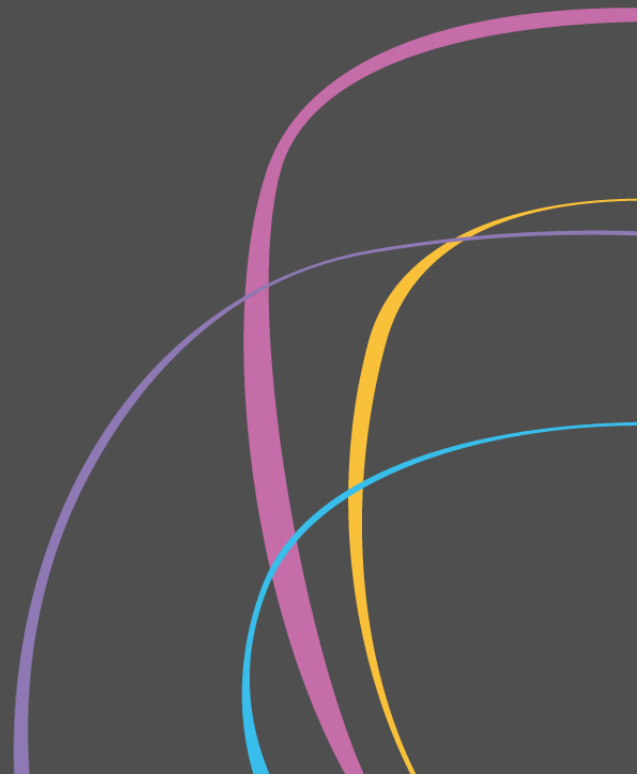
Goodstart Early Learning

Submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence

2 June 2015

**goodstart
early
learning**

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About Goodstart and this submission

Goodstart Early Learning is the nation's largest and only national provider of early learning and care. In Victoria we operate 172 Long Day Care (LDC) centres with over 4,000 staff providing services to around 21,000 children from 17,000 families.

This submission focuses on the opportunity provided through the universal mainstream Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) platform in Victoria to help foster a violence free society and identify and support those at risk of, or experiencing family violence. This submission addresses relevant questions outlined in the consultation paper and provides specific examples of our experience of the service system, highlighting what is working well and what could be improved. Goodstart would be pleased to discuss any aspect of this submission with the Commission or Commissioners.

This submission uses the term 'family violence' as defined by the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* and adopted by the Royal Commission.

The mainstream ECEC service system can help address family violence

Context

Access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has well documented benefits for children and families. ECEC supports workforce participation, especially by mothers and also supports children's learning and development.

In Victoria there are over 1,200 centres providing early learning and care to over 270,000 children, with multiple services operating in most communities.¹ By the time children start formal schooling, most families have accessed an early learning and care service.²

Mainstream universal service systems like ECEC can be an effective mechanism to drive broad societal change as well as improve service responses for individuals and families experiencing disadvantage or crisis events, provided the services are of a high quality.

The OECD has noted that an ECEC service is considered to be high quality if it:

1. provides children with caring and nurturing learning programs, and, where appropriate, specialist intervention for children
2. creates and enhances community networks
3. becomes a trusted source of information and support to families.³

Recent reforms to improve the quality of early learning are reaping benefits and services are increasing their competency to deliver on the second and third measures of high quality ECEC. As quality reforms are bedded down and overall sector capacity is increased, the potential of ECEC to identify and connect vulnerable families with a broader range of interventions and services will be enhanced. In this context the mainstream universal ECEC platform presents an opportunity for future reforms to address family violence.

¹ PC, Report on Government Services, 2013

² PC, Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Final Report, 2014

³ OECD, 2001

In addition to the features outlined above, ECEC services have a number of practical benefits that make it an ideal partner for future reforms to help foster a violence free society and to identify and support those at risk of, or experiencing family violence. In particular, benefits of the ECEC service platform include:

- ECEC centres are a safe and non-stigmatising environment for children and families
- parents engage directly with services and professional educators every day their child attends through the drop-off and pick-up routines
- parents are often engaged with services at potentially high risk periods for family violence, including returning to work, pregnancy and birth
- qualified educators and Centre Directors have good relationships with families and can often pick up relatively subtle changes in family behaviour and demeanour in their daily interactions with parents and children
- qualified educators and Centre Directors that are well connected within their local communities can provide timely referrals where appropriate
- qualified educators can provide emotional and educational support to children during times when parents' trauma can reduce their capacity to provide emotional and education support to their children
- current Commonwealth policy settings provide a near universal entitlement that allows the overwhelming majority of families to access subsidised early learning and care
- current Commonwealth policy settings provide relatively simple access to additional fee relief to provide time-limited free child care for families experiencing family violence, meaning services can provide immediate targeted relief to families when they need it.

Collectively, this means that ECEC presents a unique opportunity to act as:

- a key entry point to the broader service system by providing a non-threatening, non-stigmatising environment that is not perceived as 'welfare'
- a key platform for delivery of secondary and tertiary service responses that directly address the needs of individuals and families experiencing family violence.

What could be improved in the mainstream ECEC Service System to help address family violence?

1. Mainstream ECEC services, including Long Day Care centres could be recognised as providing a 'soft' entry point to the Family Violence service system.

- As noted above, ECEC services can provide a non-threatening, non-stigmatising environment that is accessed by hundreds of thousands of Victorian families each week. The current Victorian Department of Human Services, *Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework and Practice Guides* does not include ECEC services in the list of recognised mainstream services that provide an entry point to the Family Violence service system.
- The nature of ECEC and the profile of the workforce would require a different approach from the guides and frameworks that apply to other mainstream services like health care, Centrelink or family services. We believe it would be worth considering how ECEC services and educators could be supported to play a more active role in helping to identify and support families and children experiencing family violence. This submission discusses possible options further on page six under the section: *Workforce Capability and Capacity*.

2. Access to Commonwealth subsidies should be maintained to ensure most families can access affordable ECEC.

- The current Commonwealth subsidies delivered through the Child Care Benefit (CCB) and Child Care Rebate (CCR) mean that most families can access child care assistance to help reduce the out-of-pocket costs for child care. In particular children from families with incomes up to around \$150,000 receive access to 24 hours (2 days per week) of Child Care Benefit regardless of their parents workforce participation.
- This feature works very well and is important because it creates a very broad gateway into ECEC that does not rely on both parents being in the workforce. In the context of family violence, this is particularly important as perpetrators of family violence often move to isolate mothers by preventing them from working, studying or training, by controlling finances or limiting their access to family and friends.
- The recent reforms to child care announced in the 2015-16 Commonwealth Budget, while very beneficial for working families, will remove this access for family incomes above \$65,000 and children will only receive access to subsidy if both parents are working, studying, training or undertaking another approved activity. This could have the unintended consequence of further isolating women and their children, as access to child care will be unaffordable without access to these subsidies. We also note that this reduced access does not appear to be consistent with the Commonwealth Government's commitments outlined in the Second Action Plan 2013-16 of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children*.

3. Appropriate support and campaign materials could be developed and be available in ECEC services.

- Materials that promote awareness of family violence and support services are a simple and effective tool to help address family violence. Research suggests that displaying this type of information in universal access points like ECEC service can:
 - help people experiencing family violence to identify their situation,
 - provide non-threatening options to access support services, and
 - build general community awareness.⁴
- We believe that these materials can also assist in building awareness of family violence within the ECEC workforce. However, the images and messages in these materials need to be appropriate for display in an early learning environment. At present, although limited 'one-off' material is available we are not aware of any state-wide campaign materials that have been designed for specific use in early learning environments.⁵ We note that the provision of these types of campaign and support materials and accompanying training have also broadly been endorsed by the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children*. Professional development and training is discussed further on page six under the section: *Workforce Capability and Capacity*.

⁴ WIRE Women's information, Research Report, 2014

⁵ See here for an example, <http://www.dvrcv.org.au/publications/order-a-publication/pamphlets/family-violence-hurts-kids-too>

Future Responses - what could be improved in the Universal ECEC Service system to help respond to Family Violence?

1. ECEC services could be recognised as a mainstream entry points to the family violence service system, with appropriate guidelines developed for ECEC services and educators.
2. Access to affordable ECEC should be maintained for families where one parent is not connected to the workforce, noting that this is a primarily an area of Commonwealth Government responsibility.
3. State-wide support and campaign materials and accompanying training that are suitable for use in early learning environments could be developed and provided to services.

Interactions between the ECEC system and family violence services need to be efficient and effective to meet the needs of families

Collaboration and partnerships between universal services and secondary or intensive services are crucial to shaping the right service response for children and families. In the context of family violence, this relies on the ***availability and access to family violence services*** as well as the ***capability and capacity of the workforce*** to make referrals and support families experiencing family violence. In this section we consider these two elements separately.

Availability of and access to family violence services and other supports

There are two key service responses available to ECEC staff and families that are at risk of, or experiencing family violence:

1. Targeted, time limited child care subsidies which provide additional fee relief to ensure continuity of care for children and to alleviate financial hardship for families
2. Targeted family violence services for children and families.

1. **Targeted Child Care Subsidies:** The Commonwealth Government provides Special Child Care Benefit which can provide access to free child care for children at risk of serious abuse or neglect, or families with an exceptional case of short term financial hardship which has substantially reduced their capacity to pay child care fees, this includes parents and children escaping family violence. This program provides practical financial assistance to support the safety and well-being of those impacted by family violence. This financial assistance is available for children already enrolled in a Long Day Care centre but can also be provided to children that were not previously attending a LDC centre, although registration with Centrelink is required to access this support. More information about this program can be provided upon request.

The benefits of this program are three-fold:

1. For parents, usually mothers, it provides a time limited period where mothers can access free child care where they know their children are safe and with known carers which allows them to access support services and make arrangements. For example, in our experience this assistance is used by families escaping family violence to attend appointments with doctors, lawyers, Centrelink, real estate agents, attend job interviews and move house. It also helps parents to maintain a regular connection with a 'soft' entry point to Family Violence services.
2. For children, this program ensures they have access to a safe and stable environment with adults with whom they have strong relationships. Qualified educators can also support children that have experienced trauma as a result of family violence, although in

many cases additional training and support is required. This issue of workforce capability is discussed further in the next section.

3. For ECEC services, this program allows a relatively swift response to support families and children by removing cost barriers and also potentially increasing the number of days a child is attending ECEC. As the initial approval is made at the service level, services can make this approval without going through the sometimes cumbersome and lengthy approval processes with other Government agencies.

2. **Targeted family violence services for children and families:** Within the Goodstart network in Victoria, we have a dedicated Social Inclusion Coordinator and part of their daily role is to ensure that individual services and Centre Directors have the necessary community connections to facilitate access to support services when necessary.

We offer the following insights into the current service system from the perspective of a mainstream service provider:

- Existing referral pathways to support services, by ECEC staff to families that identify as experiencing family violence, or who have been identified as being at risk of family violence appear to work well. In particular the following services are easy to access and available to support our staff as well as families in crisis and non-emergency situations:
 - *WIRE: Women's Information and Referral Services*
 - *Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service of Victoria*
- Use of referral pathways from family violence support services to ECEC services appears to be more patchy. It appears that Family Violence services and refuges are not always aware of the support in terms of fee relief that can be provided through Long Day Care centres and in some cases concerns that there will not be a place available for children, or that the cost will be prohibitive prevents services from making inquiries.
- The strengthening of protocols between the Department of Human Services and Victoria Policy has been integral to improving support for families experiencing family violence.
- The Berry Street Family Violence therapeutic service *the Turtle Program* provides an effective free therapeutic program for children and their mothers who have experienced family violence. This service is useful for children and mothers in the northern metropolitan region and deals with the emotional and practical needs and issues arising from the violence. This type of intensive program allows mothers and children to receive support that also facilitates their ongoing attendance at ECEC.
- Goodstart is also currently partnering with Family Life, utilising Goodstart's child-friendly environments to support vulnerable families who are part of the Australian Government's contact and parenting orders program. Under this pilot program, Goodstart facilities are used at weekends for supervised child contact visits for parents in high conflict. This program has delivered benefits for children and families, including reducing anxiety during 'change-overs' and supervised visits. The program has also established closer practice relationships between Goodstart and family support services. Goodstart and Family Life continue to expand the delivery of the contact services in communities of need.

Future Responses - what could improve the availability of and access to family violence services?

1. Ensure local family violence services and refuges are aware of support, including access to subsidised early learning and child care available through Long Day Care early learning centres.

2. Ensure the Family Violence service system has capacity to respond to demand, including in the provision of therapeutic services for mothers and children. For example, consider expanding programs like *the Turtle Program*.

Capability and capacity of the ECEC workforce

From an ECEC perspective, some of the barriers to providing a holistic response to family violence arise from workforce challenges, specifically educators not having the right skills or capabilities to recognise family violence or to appropriately support adults and children experiencing family violence.

It is important to recognise that the ECEC workforce is in the process of a significant transformation, with minimum qualification requirements introduced in 2014 and many educators still ‘working towards’ or in the process of completing their Certificate III or Diploma qualification. This is a major difference between ECEC services and other mainstream service platforms like schools and hospitals. With this in mind, we would suggest that the objective should be to raise awareness and build capability within the context of ongoing professional development for the ECEC workforce. Further, it should also be noted that increasing capability by delivering additional professional development has significant costs associated with providing non-contact time for educators so additional training cannot simply be rolled-out by services within existing resources.

We offer the following insights into workforce capacity and capability and the implications for fostering a violence free society and identifying and addressing family violence:

- At Goodstart, children are central to everything we do. Nationally and within Victoria there have been several reforms over the last decade to improve outcomes and service responses for children at risk of abuse or neglect. It is appropriate that ensuring children’s safety and protection has a stand-alone policy response, and in general, this response recognises that children are often victims of family violence.

Requirements exist in the *Education and Care Services National Regulations* for services to be aware of child protection law and obligations under that law. Goodstart currently provides mandatory child protection training for all educators, and this is the primary system wide mechanism for raising awareness about family violence, albeit indirectly and only in the context of child protection. More information about Goodstart’s child protection response can be provided upon request.

- As noted earlier, the current Victorian Government, Department of Human Services, *Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework and Practice Guides 1-3 – Version 2*, does not identify ECEC services as one of the mainstream services that can provide an entry point to the Family Violence service system. Consequently the practice guides do not specifically cover LDC educators. We believe that it is appropriate that ECEC Certificate III and Diploma qualified educators do not have the same responsibilities as other professionals like GPs and maternal health nurses, however it would be potentially beneficial to develop guidance materials specifically designed for the ECEC workforce. These materials could leverage off existing guides and materials provided for child protection responses, rather than creating a new additional ‘stand-alone’ response.

- We do not think it would be appropriate for ECEC educators to be responsible for formal screening and / or risk assessment, however some of the existing resources used for professionals working in the family violence service system, could possibly be tailored to provide guidance for ECEC services, for example:
 - *Assessing children and young people experiencing family violence.*⁶
 - *CRAFT – Common Risk Assessment Framework Tool.*⁷
- Some individual Goodstart services have also identified a prevalence of family violence and have sought further training and support through the Goodstart Social Inclusion Coordinator to build the knowledge base of educators in understanding and responding to family violence. In addition to supporting families, services are also looking to understand the impact on children and how they can support them. In particular, Mernda, Endeavour Hills and Rosebud are areas that have identified family violence as an increasing concern and we are working to ensure we have adequate training and service responses in those communities.
- Once it has been identified that a child has experienced trauma associated with family violence, more could also be done to ensure that educators understand the impacts on children and the implications for their learning and development, including flow on impacts for children’s attachment with parents and other adults in their lives. While general training is provided to all Goodstart staff we also currently respond to these situations on a case by case basis through the Social Inclusion Coordinator. Other ECEC services may not have access to similar supports.

Future Responses - what could be improved to build workforce capacity and capability?

1. Raise awareness about family violence and build capability within the context of ongoing professional development for the ECEC workforce.
2. Consider the role of mainstream ECEC services and their workforce as part of the Victorian response to Family Violence and consider what sector wide guidance materials and investment to support professional development may be appropriate.

Other measures that promote a violence free society

The Early Years Learning Framework which outlines the curriculum content for the early years has been designed to promote respectful relationships between children, families and educators. This platform will help to embed societal and cultural expectations that violence, in any form is not acceptable. This will help contribute to the overarching goal of a violence free society.

⁶ http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/761379/Assessing_children_and_young_people_family_violence_0413.pdf

⁷ <http://www.tafe.swinburne.edu.au/CRAF/index.htm>

Behind Goodstart

Goodstart was created by a partnership of organisations who saw the potential of early learning to transform Australia. They wanted to address one of the key sources of many future problems—poor early childhood experiences.

From alcoholism to drug abuse and homelessness, many adult conditions can be traced to early childhood experiences.

It made perfect sense for these groups to pool their energy and invest in early learning to fix the root cause of so many social problems.



The Benevolent Society is Australia's first charity—an independent, non-religious, non-profit organisation with nearly 200 years' experience of driving positive social change. It makes a difference every day by helping people to break down the barriers that prevent them from participating fully in society. Its goal is to improve quality of life for all Australians by building connected, inclusive communities where everyone feels they belong.



The Brotherhood of St Laurence began during the Great Depression, as the vision and creation of Father Gerard Tucker, a man who combined his Christian faith with a fierce determination to end social injustice.

Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the Brotherhood continues to work for an Australia free of poverty.

The organisation undertakes research, develop and deliver services, and engage in advocacy. The Brotherhood's aim is to address unmet needs in innovative ways and translate learning from research and services into new policies, new programs and practices that can be implemented by government and others.



Mission Australia is a Christian community service organisation that has been transforming the lives of Australians in need for more than 150 years.

Today its 550 community and employment services assist more than 300,000 people nationwide by providing a hand up, a way forward and hope for the future.

The organisation strengthens families, empowers youth, strives to solve homelessness and provides employment solutions. Working with government, corporate Australia, churches and the wider community, Mission Australia aims to create a fairer Australia for all.



Social Ventures Australia (SVA) was established in 2002 as an independent non-profit organisation. SVA invests in social change by helping increase the impact and build the sustainability of those in the social sector.

SVA's investments are focused on high-potential organisations that are fostering solutions to some of the most pressing challenges facing our community. It provides funding and strategic support to carefully selected non-profit partners, as well as offering consulting services to the social sector more broadly.