POLICY BRIEF

Towards an Early Years Learning Framework

The Australian and state and territory governments are committed to the development of a national Early Years Learning Framework, and a process of consultation with the early childhood sector about the nature and content of the Framework is currently being undertaken. This Policy Brief is designed to provide policy makers and practitioners with an orientation to the general issues to be considered in the development of an Early Years Learning Framework.

For the purposes of this Policy Brief, an *early years curriculum* or *learning framework* is defined as a set of principles and practices to guide those working with young children in children's services (the focus is on early childhood settings rather than health or home-based services, important as those are). It is to be distinguished from a full *curriculum statement* (which might specify the content to be covered and/or the care and teaching processes to be used), and from *early learning standards* or *benchmarks* (that specify what young children should know and be able to do).

Why is this issue important?

By the time children reach school, there are striking disparities in their functioning across all developmental domains (Centre for Community Child Health [CCCH] & Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2007). These initial differences are predictive of later academic and occupational success (Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2007; Le et al, 2006). The provision of high-quality early childhood services can contribute greatly to reducing these gaps, thereby contributing to more positive long-term outcomes (Boethel, 2004; Sylva et al, 2004).

One of the key features of high quality early learning and care programs is that there are planned goals for children's learning and development (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2001, 2006; Sylva et al, 2004). Research has consistently shown the importance of being clear about the purpose, goals and approaches in establishing the *what* (content) and the *how* (pedagogy or educational strategies) in early learning and child care programs (Bertrand, 2007). The use of such learning frameworks in the context of nurturing and emotionally supportive relationships and settings has a positive impact on children's long-term development and learning (Klein & Knitzer, 2006; Schweinhart, 2008).

The idea of a curriculum is contentious within the early childhood sector (Elliott, 2006). The term *curriculum* tends to be equated with syllabus and the notion of a prescriptive, subject-bound set of experiences to be applied uniformly in all settings. However, an early years learning framework that defines broad developmental intentions and expectations, outlines program directions, and foreshadows developmental outcomes and how they will be monitored can contribute significantly to ongoing learning success (Elliott, 2006).

As all three levels of government are involved in the provision of early childhood services, and because policy responsibility is shared between different departments in many states, there is a patchwork of provision that means many children miss out on quality early education programs (Elliott, 2006; Press, 2006, 2008; Walker, 2004). Moreover, there is no national learning framework for the early years in Australia. This has led to significant differences in the content and organisation of curriculum for the early years across the country, particularly in the coverage of the age period birth to three years. There is an urgent need for more consistent and coherent policies across early childhood sectors and greater cohesiveness and integration within and between services in order to achieve better quality programs and better outcomes for children (Elliott, 2006; Press, 2008; Work & Family Policy Roundtable, 2006).

What does the research tell us?

An early learning framework should be based on an evidence-informed understanding of how children develop and learn and what conditions and experiences they need to do this well.

The framework should also be based on what the role of early childhood services should be. While there is much research to help us address the first two of these, determining the third involves debates about social values and understandings.

How children develop and learn. There are several key features of children's development and learning that are particularly pertinent for the development of an early learning framework. We know that children develop and learn through their relationships with others, and actively participate in reciprocal to-and-fro exchanges with parents and caregivers from birth (Gerhardt, 2004; Richter, 2004; Siegel, 1999, 2001). As they grow, they are increasingly able to be meaningfully engaged as partners by those who care for and work with them (Lancaster, 2006; Lansdown, 2005). We also know that children's early childhood experiences are crucial for their later development, and that many fundamental aspects of development are established well before a child enters school (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008).

We know that learning starts from birth, rather than beginning only in the preschool and school years (Lally, 2007; Meisels, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), and that this learning is cumulative, with later skills and learning building upon what has been learned earlier (Cunha et al, 2006). The continuity of children's experiences – between home, early childhood setting and school – is critical for such cumulative learning (Bertram & Pascal, 2002). Learning involves many aspects of children's functioning (such as emotional development, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills), not just cognitive processes (Boyd et al, 2005; Cunha & Heckman, 2006; Galinsky, 2006).

The conditions for learning and experiences of children that are most relevant to the development of an early learning framework are derived from general findings about early childhood services and specific findings about principles of effective service delivery.

General findings about early childhood services. Children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, benefit from attendance at high-quality early childhood services, both in the short- and long-term (Anderson et al, 2003; Gormley, 2007; Howes et al, 2006). Children also benefit when core early childhood services are provided on a universal rather than a targeted basis, as this achieves greater coverage and better quality outcomes (Barnett et al, 2004; CCCH, Policy Brief 2, 2006; Doherty, 2007). However, targeting can be appropriate as a secondary strategy for children

in need of special support, or from aboriginal, ethnic or low-income backgrounds. Services that benefit children most recognise that child care and education functions are inseparable, and embed these in all aspects of service delivery (Brauner et al, 2004; CCCH, Policy Brief 8, 2007; Friendly, 2008). This is especially important for infants and toddlers (Lally, 2007).

Specific findings about principles of effective service delivery. Features of effective service delivery include both interpersonal and structural features.

Key interpersonal features. Responsive and caring adult-child relationships are critical for effective service delivery (Lloyd-Jones, 2002; Melhuish, 2003; Moore, 2006). These relationships need to be consistent and secure, so staff continuity is important, especially for very young children (David, 2003; Elliott, 2006). Parents and families are recognised as having the primary role in rearing children and are actively engaged by early childhood services (Bennett, 2007; David, 2003; Mitchell et al, 2008).

> *"We know that learning starts from birth, rather than being restricted to the preschool and school years… "*

An individualised and developmentally appropriate approach is used, where staff observe and monitor children's performance to ensure they are provided with challenging yet achievable experiences (Fleer & Richardson, 2004; Kagan & Kauerz, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002). Staff also build upon children's interests, previous learning experiences and strengths and model appropriate language, values and practices (BERA Early Years Special Interest Group, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford at al, 2002). An individualised approach implies that children who are vulnerable and are experiencing difficulties with the social and emotional demands of early childhood settings should receive extra support to help them participate meaningfully in all activities (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006; Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2008).

Play-based approaches are used whereby caregivers seek to create exciting places and opportunities for young children to safely explore, experiment and practice new skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Stonehouse, 1999, Walker, 2007). Children are actively engaged at all times (Klein & Knitzer, 2006, 2007; McWilliam & Casey, 2007) and staff structure environments that promote children's optimum engagement (Elliott, 2006).

The physical setting is organised in ways that promote learning and daily routines are used to strengthen bonds and support learning (Farquhar, 2003; Montie et al, 2006, 2007; Noonan & McCormick, 2005).

There is a balance of child-initiated and teacher-directed approaches; children are recognised as capable and competent, and learning is achieved through a process of cognitive 'co-construction' (Farquhar, 2003; Graves, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002). There is also a balance between a cognitive/academic focus and a social/emotional focus, as long-term academic/school success is dependent as much on social, emotional and self-regulatory capacities as upon academic skills and knowledge (Boyd et al, 2005; Heckman et al, 2006; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). The way the latter are 'taught' is also crucial: children's learning can be slowed by overly academic preschool experiences that introduce formalised learning experiences too early (David, 2003; Marcon, 1999, 2002).

Respect for diversity, equity and inclusion are prerequisites for optimal development and learning (Kagan & Kauerz, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford, 2006). Staff need to know how to create different learning environments for children differing in temperament, ability, language, culture and ethnicity. During the preschool years, children become aware of various forms of diversity - cultural and racial, developmental, gender, and socio-economic - and their views of themselves and others are shaped by early childhood service providers' assumptions and behaviours (MacNaughton, 1999, 2000, 2006).

Structural features. There is a strong association between the ability of staff to create a sound early learning environment and the key structural features of group size (number of children in a class), staff-child ratio, and caregiver qualifications (years of education, child-related training, and years of experience) (CCCH, Policy Brief 4, 2006; Cleveland et al, 2006; Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre, 2006). Smaller group sizes and favourable staff-child ratios allow each child to receive individual attention and foster strong relationships with caregivers (Graves, 2006; Melhuish, 2003; Work and Family Policy Roundtable, 2006). As services are only as good as the people who deliver them, having well-trained staff and ongoing staff development and support is also essential (Duffy, 2006; Montie et al, 2006, 2007; Saracho & Spodek, 2007).

The role of early childhood services. There is a variety of ways of thinking about early childhood and about the purposes of early childhood services, and each of these perspectives has implications for how early childhood services are structured and delivered (Moss and Petrie, 2002). The OECD thematic review of early childhood education and care policy (Bennett, 2005; OECD, 2006) identified two broad curricula approaches: the pre-primary approach (which emphasises learning standards or expectations related to school readiness) and the social pedagogic approach (in which the acquisition of developmental skills is perceived as a by-product rather than as the driver of the curriculum) (Bertrand, 2007). In practice, most jurisdictions incorporate elements of both these approaches, but lean towards one or the other.

The evidence suggests that comprehensive and holistic services from birth to school age yield benefits that are as great or greater than preschool services alone (Morrissey & Warner, 2007). There are even arguments for including the prenatal period (Doctors et al, 2008). Given the importance of ensuring a smooth transition from early childhood services to school, there have been increasing calls for more integrated curriculum and teaching between early childhood and early school years (CCCH, Policy Brief 11, 2008). Hence, it is argued that a 0-8 years system is preferable on the grounds that a shared curriculum framework can act as a unifying influence across services for different age groups (Press, 2008; Reynolds et al, 2006).

In terms of scope and function, an early years learning framework should provide (a) parents and the general public with an understanding of what early childhood services are aiming to achieve and how they do this, (b) early childhood practitioners with guidelines to help them provide young children with the best possible care and early learning environments, and (c) governments with ways of ensuring that early childhood services are being delivered effectively.

Reviews of different curriculum and early years learning frameworks in Australia and overseas (OECD, 2001, 2006; Press, 2008) reveal significant variety in form and content. However, there are some general features that appear in most frameworks. To perform the above functions, an early years learning framework should include statements regarding; (a) the overall vision and goals for children and the role of early childhood services in achieving these, (b) the key principles on which service delivery should be based, (c) the outcomes that early childhood services can be expected to achieve and how these will be monitored, and (d) the aspects of children's learning and development that should be covered.

An early years learning framework should be concise rather than exhaustive, and provide guidance rather than being prescriptive, leaving room for local and individual applications at state, local, centre and personal levels (Moss, 2007). However, widespread agreement and commitment from early childhood practitioners for the overall vision and the underlying principles and practices of an early years learning framework is vital.

What are the implications of the research?

- There is a need for a national early years learning framework that applies to all children from birth to eight years and to all early childhood service settings.

- The framework should contain concise statements of the overall aims and outcomes of early childhood services, the principles on which service delivery should be based, the outcomes to be expected, and the aspects of children's development and learning that are to be covered.

- The framework should not include specific curriculum guidelines as to what should be covered (curriculum content) or how it should be implemented (care and teaching practices) – these should be covered by state and territory curriculum statements.

- To ensure a national early years learning framework influences practice, it must be acceptable to and taken up by practitioners, therefore an extensive period of consultation and development will be needed.

- The framework should seek to blend the traditionally separate early childhood care and education functions into a seamless service.

- Special attention needs to be given to articulating the most effective ways of supporting the learning and development of infants and toddlers.

- The early years learning framework should be framed in a way that will allow it to grow and evolve as our knowledge and views change.

Considerations for policy and programs

- Ways of ensuring consistency between existing state and territory curriculum statements/frameworks and the national framework need to be considered.

- The framework should be based on widespread agreement and support for a broad vision regarding the crucial aspects of development and learning of children from birth to school age and how this development and learning is best achieved.

- To gain such agreement and to ensure the framework's adoption by the sector, there should be an extended period of consultation and debate, culminating in accepted priorities.

- Early childhood service providers will require training and support in order to understand and apply the early years learning framework.

- How the framework links with quality assurance guidelines and with the rating system foreshadowed in the government's National Early Childhood Development Strategy requires consideration.

- There will need to be further consideration of how the framework can be extended to cover other child health professionals and in-home learning providers (e.g. parents and caregivers).