

# Early Childhood Education

Fact Sheet May 2005

- It is evident that access to a high quality pre-school education program provides a significant basis from which important foundations of literacy, numeracy, learning, behaviours, and future life opportunities can be developed.
- Children living in poverty are among those most in need of the assistance that early childhood education and care can provide, yet they are also the children most likely to be priced out of receiving its benefits. (Michael Flood, *Lost Children*, 2004)
- A number of barriers deny families and young children the benefits of quality childhood education in Australia. These include cost, transport, lack of places and a lack of awareness of services.
- Today many parents go to great lengths for their own children to have the best educational opportunities possible. However, Christians are encouraged to be concerned not just for their own children, but for other people's children as well. Jesus made it clear that a priority for his ministry was "to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18).
- Jesus showed in his ministry that he wants all people to have opportunity to realise their God-given potential. He said "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10) Christians hope that 'abundant life' will become a reality in the lives of all children today, especially for those who live in disadvantaged circumstances.



UnitingCare Burnside

Rev. Marion Gledhill

## Early childhood education

**To break the cycle of poverty, providing quality early childhood education is crucial.**

Reports and studies from across the world show that the early childhood years are very important. They tell us that what people experience in their earliest years makes a big difference to what they achieve in education and health and in the social aspects of their lives. This is true not just during their school years, but throughout their entire lives.

For children from disadvantaged backgrounds, when early experiences are limited in intellectual and language stimulation, later attempts to improve their development are often difficult, usually expensive, and in many cases unsuccessful.

**However, quality early childhood programs *do* make a difference. They can reduce the impact of poverty and disadvantage on children.**

## Benefits of early childhood education

Quality education in a pre-school or child care centre usually serves as an 'extra', and as a support to the care provided by parents. All children from at least 3 years of age will benefit from 2 or 3 days a week of early childhood education.

However, children whose parents have limited ability to provide cognitive and language stimulation need to begin early education programs at a younger age and have more days/hours in the programs.

Key studies from across the world indicate a range of benefits for children and society from the provision of preschool education. These include:

- Significant reduction in later behavioural and learning problem
- Lower levels of absenteeism when children progress to school
- Fewer referrals for remedial classes or special education
- Fewer children repeating grades
- Greater social and emotional maturity
- Significant gains for early intervention for children of lower socioeconomic background<sup>1</sup>

For children from disadvantaged backgrounds, many studies have demonstrated that quality early childhood programs make an even greater difference.<sup>2</sup> These studies show that **quality early childhood education reduces the impact of poverty on these children.**

<sup>1</sup> Kathy Walker (2004) National preschool education inquiry report, Independent Inquiry of the Australian Education Union, p.18, quotes Canadian Early Years Study, Tremblay 1999; US Early years Study 1998; EPPE UK 2003.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Barnett, W.S. 'Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Cognitive and School Outcomes', *The Future of Children*, Vol.5, No.3 (1995).

## Suggestions for action

### At your local level :

- Visit a local child care or pre-school centre. It may even be that your congregation operates one of these. Ask the Director what provisions are used by the centre to increase access for children from disadvantaged families. If the centre is federally funded, ask if they use the Special Child Care Benefit to assist disadvantaged families. Ask what supports are needed for these children when they come to the centre, and ask what benefits they receive from being there.
- If your visit indicates that access by children from disadvantaged backgrounds needs to be improved, consider talking about it with your local MP's – Federal, if the centre provides long day care and State or Territory, if it's a pre-school.

### At a wider level :

- Call on the State/Territory and Federal Governments to address and alleviate the impacts of disadvantage on children. Ask the Federal Government to expand the capacity and availability of the Special Child Care Benefit.

#### Write to :

The Hon. Sussan Ley MP  
Parliamentary Secretary (Children and Youth Affairs)

Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
and

Senator the Hon. Kay Patterson  
Minister for Family and Community Services  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

- Ask the NSW State Government to increase the number of community based preschool places available.

#### Write to :

The Hon. Reba Meagher, MP  
Minister for Community Services  
Level 37 Governor Macquarie

Tower 1 Farrer Place Sydney NSW 2000  
or email  
reba.office@meagher.minister.nsw.gov.au

- Call on the NSW State Government to establish more preschools attached to public schools, funded by the Department of Education.

#### Write to :

The Hon. Carmel Tebbutt, MLC  
Minister for Education and Training  
Level 33 Governor Macquarie Tower  
1 Farrer Place SYDNEY NSW 2000  
or email  
minister@det.nsw.edu.au

**The economic arguments** for urgent and significant investment in the early years are compelling. Money invested in the early years results in significant savings over time. Money will be saved later in the health, education, welfare and prison systems. Intervening early in the lives of children from disadvantaged backgrounds means more educated and competent workers in the future.

### Access issues

**The very group of children who need the benefits of early childhood programs are often unable to gain access to those services.**

The national pre-school education inquiry, conducted for the Australian Education Union in 2004, found that a significant number of children are not able to access pre-school because there are just not enough places.<sup>3</sup>

There is no coordinated national government policy to provide equity of access for all children to educational early childhood programs.

The 2005 Productivity Report into Government Service Provision indicates that NSW spends less per child on children's services than any other State or Territory Government, and has the lowest participation rate in the pre-schools it funds than any other State or Territory. NSW is one of the few States/Territories that does not have a free universal year of pre-school.

### Affordability is a significant barrier

Compared with other developed countries, Australia spends just 0.01% of the gross national product (GDP) on preschools, whereas other developed countries spend an average of 0.4% of GDP.<sup>4</sup>

The Federal Government provides 'Special Child Care Benefit' to assist families to afford federally funded child care where children are at risk of serious abuse or neglect or where there are exceptional cases of financial hardship. However, this special benefit is not widely used and is hampered by complex administrative requirements, and by limits to its duration.

For many disadvantaged families, the "gap" fee payable for child care programs remains unaffordable.

For further information, refer to the website of *UnitingCare* Burnside  
[www.burnside.org.au](http://www.burnside.org.au)

go to 'Resources and Training', then to 'Resources'  
then scroll down to 'Children Matter Newsletters index'  
go to No.15 "A good start for children"

***If your congregation operates a pre-school or long day centre, explore ways to increase use of the centre by children from poor or disadvantaged backgrounds.***

<sup>3</sup> Kathy Walker, op. cit., pp.51-2.

<sup>4</sup> Considine, M., Marginson, S., Sheehan, P & Kumnick, M (2001) *The Comparative Performance of Australia as a Knowledge Nation*, Monash Centre for Research in International Education, Melbourne.