


Royal Commission into early childhood education & care interim report^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

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 RCECEC-Interim-Report-Version-2-Website.pdf ^[4]	3.97 MB

Excerpts

The Royal Commission has released its Interim Report.

The Commission has heard from researchers, experts, providers and families about the importance of high-quality early childhood education and care.

It shows the opportunity for South Australia to build an early child development system that uses the best of today’s knowledge, and which learns and refines as we learn more in the future.

The report also recognises the vital role between early childhood services and the families and communities they serve, connecting families to supports that are far beyond early learning. There is an opportunity for government to invest in these supports to ensure there are no barriers for children to accessing their learning entitlement.

The report outlines a pathway for 15 hours a week of high-quality preschool for all South Australian children from the age of 3, rolling out from 2026.

The Interim Report focuses on 3-year-old preschool and will inform the Final Report which will discuss the broader Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission. The Final Report is due to be released in August.

Introduction: Growing an early child development system

South Australia—seizing an opportunity to lead in a changing world

The science is clear; the first five years of a child’s life are a period of rapid growth and development, with 85-90 per cent of brain development happening in this time. Children learn from birth, and experiences and settings during the early years have a significant influence on later life health, development and academic success. Where a home environment is nurturing, with language and learning and positive interactions, children acquire skills and dispositions for learning that have been found to benefit later academic performance and life outcomes. Where a home environment has challenges (‘risk factors’) such as poverty or violence, it can have a direct impact on a child’s brain development, in turn affecting their ability to learn generally and in a formal school environment. While the focus of the Royal Commission is on early childhood education and care, it is important we keep in mind the broader opportunity to grow an early child development system, of which education and care is only a part. An early child development system is one that supports each child to develop to their full potential by bringing together all the things we know matter.

Investing in and supporting babies and children and their families in the early years is good for them and good for South Australia. The dividends for the State are long lasting because a positive start in the early years has an impact on learning, health, work and personal characteristics throughout adult life. However, what is currently scientifically known is just the start of a coming revolution in our understanding of the early years. Each year, scientists have a better understanding of the impact of a range of factors on healthy early child development, including:

- genetics, encoded in the DNA of each individual;
- epigenetics, meaning the way genes are expressed in an individual, often affected by an individual’s environment;
- nutrition, which has now been shown to have a specific impact on brain development, as well as an impact on physical health generally;
- gut microbiome, meaning the unique set of micro-organisms in each child’s gastro-intestinal tract;

- neurology, which deals with the brain, spinal cord and nerves;
- the biological impacts of stress, exercise, exposure to the outdoors, parent interactions (including parenting style and parental mental health), sleep and more.

Multi-disciplinary work across all of these fields is expanding the frontiers of scientific knowledge and will enable us to develop an increasingly precise answer to the questions ‘what experiences matter most, at what points, in a child’s early years’?

This new knowledge from the laboratory is being matched with insights from large-scale cohort studies,⁸ including those focused on what is known as implementation science, which aims to answer the questions— ‘what works?’ and ‘how can we make things work at scale?’

As part of the Royal Commission’s work, we asked two scientists leading projects at the forefront of this kind of multi-disciplinary work to give us their perspective on where knowledge of early child development could take us over the next ten to twenty years.

Professor Melissa Wake is leading GenV, a whole-of-state research project which is open to all babies born in Victoria over two years from mid-2021. The large-scale project will provide the community, researchers and government with population-wide insights into the health and wellbeing of young children.

Dr Holly Baines is leading 1kD at Wellcome Leap, a multi-disciplinary, multi-research team project that is aiming to develop accurate, scalable, early screening methods to predict executive functioning in the first 1000 days of a child’s life, using neural imaging, computer simulations and much more. Their imaginings of what we might know in the next ten years are provided at the end of this report. They are inspiring, but also daunting for policy makers who must make decisions in the uncertain present.

At the same time these new insights are emerging, better joined-up data platforms and analytics are evolving to the point where population wide data can better inform who needs what help in the early years.

For example, in partnership with national research networks and State Government agencies, the BetterStart Group at the University of Adelaide has built the Better Evidence Better Outcomes Linked Data (BEBOLD) platform. BEBOLD holds de-identified data on over 500,000 South Australian children and young people who were born since 1991, tracking their interactions with the health, social, education and justice systems. Using this data, BetterStart have prepared a model for the Royal Commission that is able to predict 38.5 per cent of the children who will go on to be identified as developmentally vulnerable at age five using 23 routinely recorded administrative data points. In some geographic areas, the model can predict more than two thirds of the children who will go on to be developmentally vulnerable.

The power of using this predictive data in a systemic way could be life changing. Instead of waiting until a child presents at school with developmental issues, the model could help us identify and provide timely and effective additional supports to that child.

The Commission’s work recognises the fast rate of scientific progress and the increasing power of data analytics. It is also being undertaken against the backdrop of governments in Australia and around the world reviewing their early childhood education and care policies and structures, as a result of this new science and data, and the need to address the concerns about the cost and accessibility of child care, which have labour market participation consequences, especially for women.

Of particular relevance to this inquiry, the Australian Government is currently developing an Early Years Strategy and has commissioned both the Productivity Commission and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to independently review the early childhood education and care sector, with a focus on accessibility, affordability, developmental outcomes and pricing structures.

Changes to family assistance legislation that take effect in July 2023 will improve the affordability of childcare, increasing the Child Care Subsidy to up to 90 per cent for some families. The Productivity Commission will specifically consider options to increase the Child Care Subsidy further, with a view to improving Australia’s economic growth and productivity through increasing the workforce participation of women.

These pieces all intersect with the work of the Royal Commission.

This dynamism creates both a challenge and an opportunity.

The challenge is that any system-wide decisions made now can quickly become out of date because of the changes in scientific understandings, improvements in data analytics and reform of key policy settings.

But we believe that this challenge is far outweighed by the opportunity for South Australia to lead the world in the translation of the best of new science into its early childhood education and care system.

This is not new for South Australia. South Australia is used to being a leader in policy debate and innovation. South Australia has a history of being curious and informed. Programs including Thinkers in Residence have opened South Australia up to new ideas in areas such as housing and homelessness, renewable energy and climate change, modern manufacturing and early childhood education and care. The State’s public service has shown its ability to respond to new ideas with innovative delivery that changes lives.

High quality education and research is already happening at our internationally recognised universities. Opportunities are likely to increase with the prospect of two of our universities combining strengths and merging in the near future.

The State is home to innovative research at the SA Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI) located in its iconic headquarters in Adelaide’s expanding biomedical precinct. Research at SAHMRI has focused on improving health equity for vulnerable communities, preventing chronic disease, exploring innovative treatments for cancer and supporting health outcomes for children.

For all the new insights emerging in scientific research, there is little evidence and few examples of how to translate these new ideas into practical settings for families and children, such as in the formal and informal environments in which they learn.

For example, the Commission has heard that, in relation to preschool, there is no clear evidence about the optimal amount of time, the best program configuration or the most appropriate pedagogical approach, meaning the methods and practices used by the early childhood teacher, for different cohorts of children.

Clearly, there is a need to build a better bridge between the science and what is happening in a child's life experience, especially as the quantum of research findings will keep growing. To take one example, we do not yet have good longitudinal information on the impact of screen time on children, but ultimately there will be robust studies in the area. Currently, there is no established mechanism to translate those findings into the best possible actionable steps for teachers and families to take. What is required is the ability to trial the possible approaches in a time efficient way and then get the most effective ones out into the hands of policy makers and care givers.

South Australia has the opportunity to build the bridge, both shaping and riding the wave of emerging scientific understanding of the early years and increasingly sophisticated data analytics. The State is well placed to do this, with a deeply rooted tradition of placing a strong value on early learning and thought leadership in the sector.

The South Australian government can invest in an early child development system that grows and adapts with increasing knowledge and understanding – a 'learning system' – and demonstrate to the nation and the world what can be achieved for children by being at the leading edge of research translation into everyday practice.

The work of Dr Fraser Mustard and Professor Carla Rinaldi as Thinkers in Residence continues to influence our early childhood education and care sector, and the Royal Commission has heard from many stakeholders that this work must not be forgotten.

This can be combined with a nascent but exciting local capability to bring together new ways for government, researchers and the community to use data to support better outcomes for children and families. The Commission has heard evidence about how the South Australian government, in partnership with researchers, lived experience advocates, non-government service providers and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, has deployed linked data analysis to powerful effect in providing support to the most vulnerable families in the Child and Family Safety System.

In the context of building this bridge, our population scale is a valuable asset. South Australia is the right size to be at the forefront of developing ideas about what works. Our State can be home to an early childhood sector that is defined by a culture of caring and learning.

In the next phase of our inquiry, we will challenge South Australians to consider 'what will it take for South Australia to lead on early childhood education and care in a changing world?'

The Commission will continue to seek evidence on the elements that might be required to make this reform agenda successful. It might, for example, include legislative reform that embeds the learning entitlement of children. This could be paired with a long term funded research agenda using our established research community at SAHMRI and the universities, which positions South Australia in the sphere of international research through global outreach structures. Improvements in the quality and use of data to evaluate the impact of reforms in public health and child development could lead to a system that learns and adjusts, disrupting disadvantage and changing the lives of future generations.

Against this background, this Interim Report details recommendations around one key piece of a renewed system of early childhood education and care in South Australia, namely the rollout of three-year-old preschool. In mapping the way forward, every endeavour has been made to show how three-year-old preschool could be part of a system of continuous learning and contribute to a vision of South Australia leading the world in early childhood education and care. In this context the Royal Commission has formed two overarching policy questions for this Interim Report:

What should be the learning and development entitlement of every three-year-old South Australian child?

and

What is the central aim of three-year-old preschool and what are the secondary but still important aims?

The recommendations in this report start to answer these questions but should be viewed as 'in principle' recommendations which may be amended or built upon in the Commission's Final Report.

They are provided here at the midpoint of the Commission's inquiries to give the community the opportunity to gain this insight into the Commission's thinking and respond to it.

We want readers of this Interim Report to share our sense of excitement about what we could achieve together. Our State could be at the forefront of taking the best of new knowledge from around the world and testing and trialling how it could be put into action. The evidence gained would then be used to keep what is being offered to our children at the leading edge and to enable others to learn from our example. We hope this is a vision which inspires.

Related link: Study finds early educators around the world feel burned out and devalued, suggests ways to help ^[5]

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