

# Investing in childhood: the progress and the pitfalls <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

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Over the past few years, governments around Australia have adopted a new national policy framework for early education and care, agreed to deliver a year of preschool education to all children by 2013 and endorsed the phasing in of new, nationally consistent quality standards. Since 2006, total government expenditure on early education and care has increased by more than 50 per cent in real terms. Outside the world of early childhood, however, these changes are not widely known.

These are encouraging developments, but there remain traps - both in policy and implementation - that could stymie moves towards more accessible, affordable, high-quality education and care around Australia. And there is a major weakness in the new policy framework: the absence of any articulated link between responsibility for the care of children and gender equality.

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It was in this context that the federal, state and territory governments, through the Council of Australian Governments, or COAG, endorsed the wide-ranging National Early Childhood Development Strategy: Investing in the Early Years. The strategy focuses on children from birth to eight years and embraces education, childcare and health as well as housing, child protection and family support. It has a particular focus on reducing inequalities between groups of children.

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Early childhood services have traditionally been regulated by the states and territories, and inconsistent regulations have been a longstanding concern. As part of the national reform agenda, a National Quality Framework will guide the licensing and quality rating of long day care, family day care, outside school hours care and preschools from January 2012. The framework introduces nationally consistent regulations and improved ratios of staff to children and requires a more highly skilled and qualified workforce in all early childhood settings. Parallel legislation will be introduced in all jurisdictions to establish a new legal and regulatory framework for early childhood education and care and lay the groundwork for a unified national system. A learning framework for the preschool years, *Belonging, Being and Becoming*, forms part of the new quality arrangements; a separate framework, *My Time, Our Place*, will apply to school-age care services.

Significant changes to staff-to-child ratios and qualifications are to be phased in over several years. By January 2014, all long day care and preschool services catering to twenty-five or more children will need to employ a qualified early childhood teacher. Half of the staff employed in each long day care centre or preschool will need to have, or be working towards, a diploma-level early childhood education and care qualification or above. Other staff in centre-based childcare and all family day carers will be required to have, or be working towards, a Certificate III level early childhood education and care qualification, or equivalent. Achieving these targets and attracting and retaining qualified professional staff in services characterised by low pay, poor promotion prospects and sometimes arduous working conditions may prove to be the critical challenge for the sector. A high proportion of the staff in long day care are currently paid at minimum award rates, have few opportunities for career progression and do not benefit financially from upgrading their qualifications.

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Under Australia's market-based childcare system, parents are seen as consumers who purchase services in a competitive marketplace. The childcare benefit effectively operates as a voucher that parents can spend at an approved service of their choice. This is very different from preschools, where the dominant model around Australia is either a free service provided as part of the school system or a relatively low-cost community service. The issue here is not whether individual, private services can provide excellent care and education - clearly they can. The question is whether there is evidence at a system level that the market can deliver the outcomes for children envisaged in Australia's early childhood agenda. At this stage, the research evidence suggests we should exercise considerable caution.

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While efforts to integrate education, care and health are laudable, services for young children also need to be considered in relation to the broader policy agenda. As yet, there is little evidence that this is occurring. For example, there is a notable lack of coherence between Australia's new national paid parental leave scheme and the approach to early childhood education and care outlined here. The parental leave scheme provides eighteen weeks' paid leave at the minimum wage for eligible families. From the child's perspective, we could

interpret this as an implicit guarantee of the possibility of six months of parental care, with public support. After that, however, there is no entitlement to care or education until the child becomes eligible for fifteen hours of preschool education in the year before formal school begins. And despite the fact that the majority of mothers are back at work before their children start school, the early childhood agenda contains no targets for providing care for one-, two- and three-year-old children and no mechanisms for linking services to areas of greatest need.

Another striking feature of Australia's early childhood agenda is the absence of any recognition of the role of children's services in supporting a more equal division of labour between women and men. The principles articulated in Investing in the Early Years include "a focus on the whole child," "a focus on the whole service system" and "a focus on respect for diversity and difference" but there are no references to the connections between childcare and the promotion of gender equality. This could, in part, be a reaction by elements of the early childhood community to the perception that in the past the federal government's focus on childcare has been excessively workforce-oriented and insufficiently focused on the interests of children. Still, the absence of even the smallest gesture towards gender equality is noteworthy. The strategy refers in a general way to "outcomes for families related to workforce participation" and the childcare reform package is featured as a gender equality measure in other government documents such as the Women's Budget Statement, but there are no clear mechanisms that compel governments to follow through on these statements or to enable the tracking of progress towards goals.

EARLY childhood policy in Australia is undergoing profound restructuring and reform, much of it positive, though some of it less ambitious than it should be. COAG has proved to be an effective mechanism for establishing and maintaining federal leadership in the sector and significant steps have been taken towards improving quality standards, streamlining regulatory processes and strengthening the skills and qualifications of the early childhood work force. But much remains to be done. The new agenda is being built on a legacy of division between sectors, providers and levels of government. Finding effective ways to address the gaps, inconsistencies and pitfalls of this legacy is a major challenge for the implementation of Australia's new early childhood agenda.

A parallel challenge is to develop ways of rewarding and remunerating early childhood professionals at levels commensurate with the value and importance of their work while ensuring that families, especially the most disadvantaged, are not excluded from services. If the overall goal is to provide all children with the best start in life, and to support the participation of both women and men in social and economic life, additional investment by governments and taxpayers is both inevitable and desirable.

-reprinted from Inside Story

**Region:** Australia and New Zealand <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** economics <sup>[3]</sup>

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