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Families at the centre: What do low income families say about care and education for their young children? [1]

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Source: University of New South Wales
Format: Report
Publication Date: 17 Nov 2014

Attachment	Size
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Summary

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a major focus of public policy, public debate and social expenditure in Australia and internationally. The benefits of participation in high quality ECEC are especially strong for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite a surge of interest in early childhood education, there is little information about how early childhood services operate at the local level, how parents make decisions about the use of ECEC services, how they negotiate local markets and how they understand the subsidies and rules that govern access to ECEC. This policy snapshot presents findings from Families at the Centre, a research project funded by the Australian Research Council and conducted by researchers from the Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW, with the support of Mission Australia, Early Childhood Australia, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and the Gowrie services based in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. Families at the Centre was designed to deepen understanding of how ECEC fits into the lives of low-income families and to explore how well services meet the needs and reflect the values of low-income families. The researchers also wanted to get a better understanding of how families manage the subsidies and rules that govern access to the various forms of ECEC. The findings are particularly timely given the debate generated by the Productivity Commission inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning.

Findings. Recognise family needs for security and safety. When it comes to early childhood services, we learned from parents in our study that safety and security can take precedence over access to formal education and care. Once families feel that their needs for safety from violence, secure housing and financial stability are being met, they can focus on ECEC. If all children are to benefit from early learning, then policy needs to enable services to stay connected
with families through difficult time , or to reconnect with families quickly.

Keep ECEC affordable for all families. Families told us that it is essential that ECEC is affordable. If families cannot afford the fees, they cannot use the services. Subsidies from government make ECEC accessible for families who would not otherwise afford it and these subsidies need to be available for families who are getting themselves into a work ready position as well as those that are already working. Parents talked about instability in their working lives, and valued the fact that they could continue using ECEC services when they were out of work, when their hours were unpredictable, or when they were participating in training or searching for new jobs. The Productivity Commission proposal that ECEC subsidies be limited to families where the sole parent or both parents are working, training or studying at least 24 hours per fortnight does not recognise this flux in the li es of low income families.Further, if the process of claiming subsidies is too complex, families will make mistakes with costly consequences. Services need to explain and guide families through the subsidy system.

Listen to families. The families in our study stressed the importance of professional listening and responsiveness. Attention to children's learning is not enough: professional discourse can alienate families and stymie the flow of dialogue. Families do not want a one-way flow of information. They want services to listen to them and respect them. They want to communicate their expertise about their own children.

It's not just 'my child'. All families want what is best for their children, but many also believe that achieving the best for their children can involve networks of families or whole communities. Instead of focusing solely on their own children, sometimes families want to work together, share ideas, give each other courage and support, and collectively secure the resources they need. But developing trusted networks can be difficult and finding the right resource can be overwhelming. Policy can enable skilled educators within adaptable services to help families build supportive networks.

Implications. The key findings from Families at the Centre point to a need for flexible, responsive services that have wide horizons and are not narrowly focused on the education and care of children. Holistic, integrated or wrap around services offer much broader resources

than stand-alone care and education services. In this, they are a close match to the service and resource needs expressed by many of the most disadvantaged families in the study

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