

Quality childcare is a good start ^[1]

Opinion

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Source: The Australian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 1 May 2015

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

To boost the nation's productivity, the federal government is trying to encourage more women back into the workforce after having a child. There are clear economic benefits in such a policy, which generally has widespread community support.

The accessibility and affordability of childcare is an important consideration for parents in considering whether to rejoin the workforce and has been a major issue for successive governments.

There is no simple solution to tackling skyrocketing childcare prices and at the same time introducing new flexible models of service provision.

It is clear the way the present system is structured and paid for is complex and in need of reform. What is equally clear is this reform must continue to pay attention to the issue of quality. Quality, or educational, childcare is a high-return investment for governments that has the potential to amplify the development and long-term earning prospects of millions of Australian children.

Many professionals are concerned the research evidence about brain development in the early years has not been properly taken into account in the recent report of the Productivity Commission. It is to be hoped that the soon-to-be-released childcare policies will be more cognisant of this research.

The National Quality Framework, which ensures high-quality early years services, is a world-leading example of how these research findings can be translated into practical strategies to amplify young children's development; Social Services Minister Scott Morrison's commitment to maintain the NQF is to be applauded.

Recent science has shown important and rapid development happens very early in life. Evidence from research conducted across four decades and in numerous countries has confirmed educational childcare increases rates of healthy development.

It also reduces problems in adulthood, such as depression, drug addiction, unemployment and crime, especially for children growing up in disadvantaged and under-resourced families.

This translates into huge social and economic savings to society. In Australia more than 20 per cent of children arrive at school behind or vulnerable in their development when compared with their peers; in some communities the percentage is much higher.

Many of these children will not be able to catch up, despite the best efforts of teachers.

Australian data tell us that those children who attended preschool or educational childcare are less likely to arrive at school delayed in their development.

Early childhood learning takes place when children and teachers form relationships that positively influence the way young children develop. Educational childcare professionals engage young children individually, frequently and interactively in learning activities and draw children out with questions and respond with interest to children's wonder and curiosity in their world.

Despite the best intentions, many families struggle to provide the same sort of social and learning opportunities because of their own circumstances; having their children attend educational childcare can enhance their social and cognitive development and help ensure they get off to a good start at school.

A market-driven approach to childcare, as recommended in the Productivity Commission report, will not create the conditions for a system of educational childcare and may in fact run counter to quality considerations.

Significant populations of children at risk of school failure and welfare dependency — including children born into poverty, children with mental health problems, children affected by homelessness as well as indigenous children — will miss out on the educational childcare they depend on for academic growth early in life. Millions of other children will lose the opportunity to boost their brain power and social and

emotional development.

Australia is behind the curve on childcare expenditure compared with most OECD countries as a proportion of gross domestic product. Greater public investment is needed for the extra training and staff needed to get quality into all forms of childcare without leaving low and middle-income families further out of pocket. Paying subsidies directly to providers can help avoid a cost spiral where greater government assistance is quickly absorbed into service price rises.

While the additional and upfront costs of a system of educational childcare may not seem politically viable, as we look for ways to keep our country prosperous and enhance productivity we cannot ignore the connection between child development and economic development. The first few years of a child's life provide a unique window of development where enlightened, research-informed public policy can make a major and sustainable difference to a nation — an investment in social infrastructure. This is as important to productivity as increasing women's participation in the workforce.

-reprinted from The Australian

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

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