



everyone's family

Submission on *Early Childhood* Consultation Paper

October 2015

Anton Leschen
General Manager Victoria
Level 7, 50 Queen Street
Melbourne
PO Box 207
Collins Street West VIC 8007

Telephone 03 9473 4333
anton.leschen@thesmithfamily.com.au

Introduction

The Smith Family¹ warmly welcomes the Victorian Government's Consultation process regarding *The Education State*, including early childhood. The importance of the early years to an individual's long-term social and economic wellbeing is now indisputable. Early childhood is a time of great opportunity and potential challenge. It is a particularly important time for providing disadvantaged families with the types of support which can help their children flourish.

The Smith Family particularly welcomes the focus of the government on ensuring 'excellence in outcomes and services for **every child**' and to identifying that this is '**everyone's business**'. Only through such an inclusive approach will Victoria realise its goal of being the *Education State*.

Early childhood development outcomes - strengths and challenges

The development and implementation of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) has been a significant achievement and provides considerable insights on the progress of Victorian children across a range of five key areas. These areas have all been shown to be critical to children's long-term wellbeing and are predictive of later outcomes.

The strengths of the AEDC include that it is a multi-dimensional, robust, community level measure which has almost universal coverage and has been undertaken three times.

Importantly the AEDC provides information on different groups of children, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, as well as offering a nuanced understanding of what is happening at a very local level. Potentially this means that responses can be highly targeted, increasing the likelihood of their success.

The Smith Family urges the Victorian Government, as part of its focus on the early years, to continue to support the development, implementation and use of the AEDC for policy and program development.

Of particular concern to The Smith Family is the fact that the AEDC shows a quarter of children in Victoria's most disadvantaged communities are developmentally vulnerable in the first year of school. Related to this, is our concern that there remain too many Victorian children, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, who start school with developmental concerns which have not been identified. The possibility of early intervention has been lost to them, with potential long-term negative consequences.

¹ Background on The Smith Family is in the Appendix.

While there are very high proportions of Victorian children participating in an initial home visit by a Maternal Child Health nurse and attending kindergarten in the year before school, the full benefit of such important initiatives is not yet being realised, particularly for disadvantaged families. Large numbers of these families are not participating in the full range of maternal child health visits which are available, nor are their children benefiting from kindergarten. Importantly in the kindergarten area, enrolments alone may not tell the full picture. A more nuanced understanding could be gained from looking at attendance (ie the frequency of participation) to get a clearer sense of children's participation in kindergarten.

Further, while there are currently policies for all vulnerable three year old children in Victoria to have high quality early learning and care for 15 hours, our experience is that in practice this is very difficult to access for families and is challenging for staff to manage. Our experience is that disadvantaged families often find it very difficult to access the demand-driven three year old kindergarten, even though their children would benefit significantly from it. Thus the intent of the Early Start Kindergarten policy is good, but it is complex to implement and for parents/carers to access.

While there is a strong early years framework in Victoria for supporting children's development, the programs and policies which flow from this are not impacting sufficiently well at the local level to achieve the desired impact, particularly for disadvantaged children. The Smith Family's experience is that implementation of the framework is not of a uniformly high quality, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

Multiple jurisdictions and portfolios

Compounding this is the complexity of policies from Local, State and Commonwealth governments which impact on the lives of children and families. At their best, these policies are complementary, have common goals and initiatives reinforce one another. At their worst however, policies may have conflicting goals, lead to gaps in service delivery, duplication and result in both ineffective and inefficient approaches. There is a risk that this will particularly be the case in disadvantaged communities where there can be a range of policies and initiatives taking place which are the responsibility of different jurisdictions and/or portfolios. For example, there appears to be an implicit expectation that local government will provide some resources to complement those of the State government to support maternal and child health services. This expectation is not always met by local governments, particularly if the area is not a high growth area with many young families. As a result, those families in such local government areas may miss out on being able to access high quality maternal and child health services.

The Smith Family is cognisant that very different governance arrangements apply in the United Kingdom from those in Victoria, however the UK approach of a common agreement being developed regarding policies, outcomes and service access is very much welcomed and offers significant potential for improving the lives of children. The Smith Family particularly notes and welcomes the UK government's commitment of 15 hours of free education and care per week being available to 40% of the most disadvantaged two year olds. This is a very important early intervention approach and one which both should be monitored and potentially considered in the Victorian context. Victoria has a long history of leadership and innovation supporting children in the Australian context and this could be further enhanced by realising a similar commitment.

Parental engagement in children's learning

Parental bonding and engagement in their child's learning and development is key to a child's long term wellbeing. Research shows that what a parent does with their child matters more than who they are.² Parental engagement is particularly important in disadvantaged families and is one of the keys to breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and disadvantage. The Smith Family's experience working with highly disadvantaged families shows that through building respectful and long-term relationships with families, parents/carers can be supported to be actively engaged in their children's development.

While the maternal and child health services include a focus on supporting parental attachment, there are also a range of other opportunities and programs which can particularly strengthen parents' engagement in their child's learning. This engagement is critical in the early years to ensure that children are able to start school ready to learn and thrive. The Smith Family has been developing and implementing effective programs which support disadvantaged parents to develop the early literacy and early mathematics development of their children.

Let's Count and Let's Read

Let's Count is an effective early mathematics program which improves the skills and dispositions of children, aged three to five, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and sets them up for success at school. *Let's Count* was developed by The Smith Family in partnership with Professors Bob Perry and Ann Gervasoni in 2009. It supports parents/carers and early years educators to support the mathematical development of the children in their care. In particular, it strengthens the home learning environment, which is critical if disadvantaged children are not to start school behind.

² Fox S & Olsen A (2014) *Defining Parental Engagement*, ACT Department of Education and Training: Canberra.

Since 2011 *Let's Count* has supported 8,000 children, 4,500 parents/carers and over 300 educators, from 17 disadvantaged communities across Australia. This includes in Collingwood, Ballarat and Shepparton.

A three year longitudinal evaluation has shown that *Let's Count*:

- Has a positive impact on children, parents and educators
- Contributes to strong growth in the mathematical skills and knowledge of children who participated. This growth was larger than for similar children who didn't participate in the program.
- Positively impacts on children's mathematical dispositions
- Helps to increase the skills and confidence of parents and educators to support children's mathematical development
- Strengthened the relationship between educators and parents and ensured greater continuity between the learning environments of the home and early childhood setting.

Let's Count is a cost-effective program which has already been scaled and could be easily expanded with additional funding support. It leverages and enhances local partnerships and existing services, and the cost per child for a full year of the program is approximately \$50. Further information on *Let's Count* is available at www.thesmithfamily.com.au

Let's Read was developed by the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The Smith Family implements *Let's Read* in partnership with Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

The program provides disadvantaged parents and carers with reading books and support to encourage them to have fun reading with their young children. *Let's Read* gives parents and carers clear and simple information by providing a "Share and Show" technique, given that children learn more when something is shown to them as well as explained.

Let's Read encourages children to develop a love of books and the ability to name letters and play with the sounds of words. The program includes multiple points of support at four key points in a child's early years of development – from 4 months, 12 months, 18 months and 3.5 years.

To build on existing relationships within communities, *Let's Read* is delivered by a range of professionals whom disadvantaged families already trust, such as maternal and child health workers, Early Childhood Workers and local playgroups. This approach is both efficient and helps to build local capacity.

The Smith Family delivers *Let's Read* in more than 50 disadvantaged communities throughout Australia each year. In 2014 over 8,000 children were supported in Victoria through *Let's Read*, across 20 communities, and close to 200 professionals were trained. As with *Let's Count*, *Let's Read* could be further expanded with additional support. Further information on *Let's Read* is also available at www.thesmithfamily.com.au

In the context of efforts to support children's early development and to setting Victoria up to become the Education State, an expansion of both *Let's Count* and *Let's Read* could make a contribution. Given the significant unmet need in these areas and the effectiveness of these programs The Smith Family would be keen to see such programs expanded.

What needs to change?

The Smith Family notes the discussion paper has identified five inter-connected areas of reform. The Smith Family agrees with the areas identified and would put particular emphasis on *more support for parents, more support for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families* and *better connection between services*.

Critical to improving the wellbeing of Victorian children is the capacity of staff who work with children and families to build respectful relationships from the first point of engagement. This is especially critical for families from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or those who have experienced trauma. If the early engagement with families is not done well, then critical opportunities for support are likely to be lost for those families most needing it. An initial positive engagement, particularly through soft-entry points, can provide the basis for then supporting families to access a range of other supports.

The Smith Family would argue that one of the fundamental pillars for success in improving outcomes for children in Victoria is to train and skill up staff across children and family services so they are able to build positive relationships with highly disadvantaged families, including those who have experienced trauma. Such training needs to be adequately resourced and seen as central to quality service delivery. We would urge that quality training be compulsory for any staff working with vulnerable families.

Given the highly complex service systems which impinge on the lives of children and families, The Smith Family would also urge that a continued focus be given to resourcing better connections across services and systems. While there is considerable goodwill across programs and organisations to ensure better coordination and connections, this takes time, resources and skills to be done well. This needs to be acknowledged and made explicit, including in funding agreements.

One of the major challenges facing the current system, particularly in disadvantaged communities, is the significant waiting list many families experience for accessing critical assessments relating to developmental delay. In some of the communities where The Smith Family works, the waiting list can be 12 months, resulting in a significant increase in the likelihood of poor outcomes. Earlier identification is critical complemented by very active and supported referral processes.

Some of the approaches which could improve this include: strengthening the capacity of staff of supported play groups to identify potential developmental issues and enhancing their skills in working with families to take up referral opportunities; and an increased use of mobile assessment teams which can go to where families are, rather than relying on families to come to the service.

The Smith Family's experience working with disadvantaged families is that for a range of reasons, including language and lack of understanding of the Australian service system, many disadvantaged families may not realise the seriousness of issues being identified or the potential long-term impact of not addressing them. Simple communication tools, which are culturally and linguistically appropriate, and explain such issues to families, are required. While information is often available on websites, often this is not an effective or easy communication strategy for disadvantaged families. Central to communicating with them is building strong and positive relationships and helping them access and understand what can be complex and unfamiliar service systems and supports.

There are a range of structural factors which could support the Government's goal of the wellbeing of children being 'everyone's business'. These include:

- a clear Child and Young People's Framework which is cross-portfolio and cross-sectoral that identifies the goals and outcomes being sought for all children
- pooled funding which is cross portfolio and enables communities to work together to achieve shared goals for their children
- shared accountability arrangements in line with agreed goals for children
- publicly available data which enables progress to be tracked over time, using robust measures, including for different groups of children and for different geographical units
- the establishment of realistic timeframes for efforts aimed at improving outcomes for children.

The Collective Impact approach first articulated by John Kania and Mark Kramer offers insights into such approaches. The Smith Family is currently a partner on an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant led by Professor Ross Homel from Griffith University which is applying an enhanced collective impact approach across multiple disadvantaged communities, with the goal of improving children's developmental outcomes. The Smith Family would be happy to elaborate further on this project.

Conclusion

Victoria has a long history of innovation and concern for the wellbeing of children. It has invested extensively in frameworks and service systems that support children's wellbeing. However there is clear evidence that not all Victorian children are thriving. This is particularly the case for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and is setting them up for long-term negative outcomes. Access to quality services varies by location and for different families.

The Victorian government has indicated it is serious about changing this situation and ensuring that **all** Victorian children have a strong start in life. The Smith Family commends the government on this goal and looks forward to continuing to work with all sectors to improve the lives of disadvantaged children in Victoria.

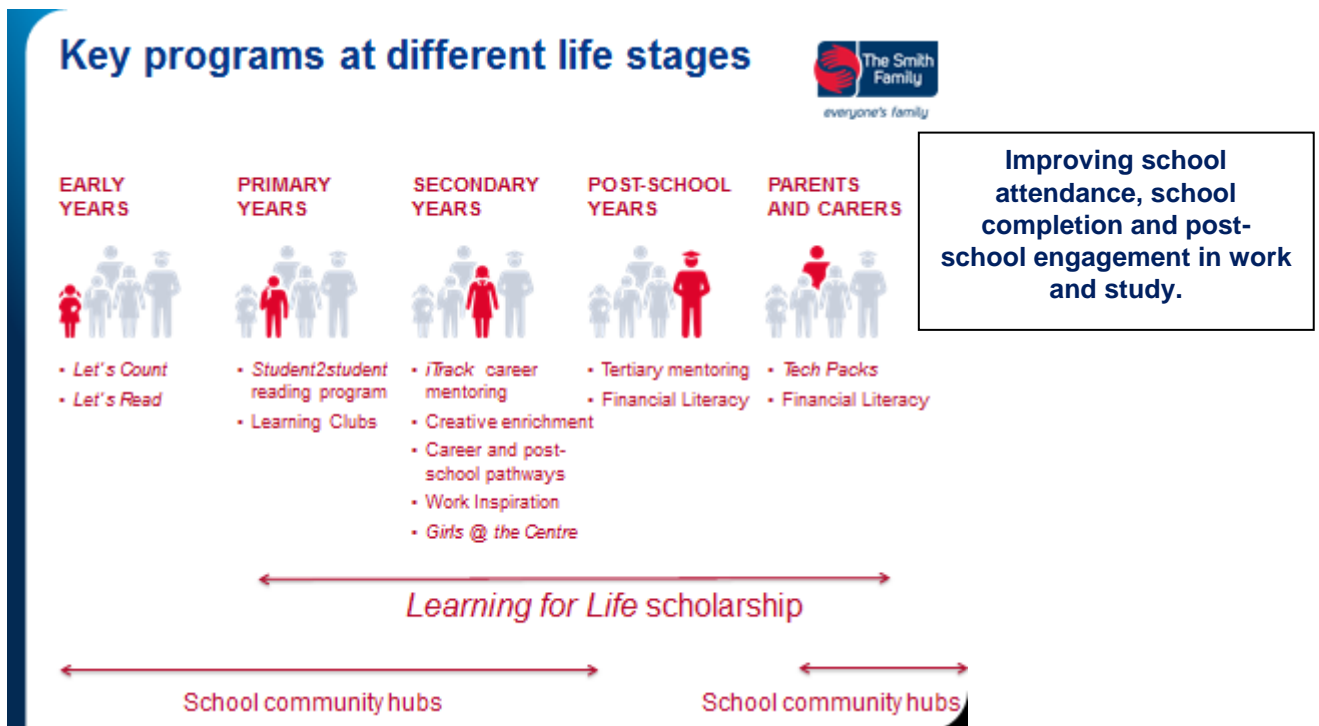
Appendix - The Smith Family

The Smith Family is Australia's largest education-oriented charity and delivers programs in 94 communities across all states and territories. In the 2013-14 financial year we supported over 134,000 disadvantaged children, young people and their families. This included over 15,500 from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

In Victoria, we work across 14 communities, half of which are regional, including Ballarat, Morwell and Shepparton. In 2013-14 we supported around 24,000 disadvantaged children, young people and their families in Victoria. Around 1,100 of these young people and their carers/parents were from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Our programs begin in the early years and continue through to tertiary education, as shown in Figure 1. Our largest program, *Learning for Life*, is a long-term educational scholarship which supports around 34,000 children and young people each year nationally, including 7,000 in Victoria. We also facilitate a number of school community hubs in Victoria which involve a range of cross-sector partnerships focused on improving educational outcomes. Around 1,800 children, young people, parents/carers and community workers were involved in these hubs over the last year.

Figure 1: Educational programs at different stages of a young person's life



Mindful of the fact that collaboration is essential for improving student outcomes, our approach is very much one of partnerships - with families, schools, governments, corporates and philanthropy. We have 500 partner schools and work with 137 corporates, 73 Trusts and Foundations and 25 Universities across Australia. In Victoria we partner with approximately 85 schools.

The Smith Family is working to improve three key longer-term outcomes for the young people we support, namely: school attendance, school completion and engagement in employment, education or training post-school.