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# **Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning**

## **Submission**

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### **The importance of the early years for positive long term outcomes**

The economic and social consequences of poor educational outcomes are severe for the individual, their family and Australia as a whole. Young people with poor educational outcomes are more likely to experience unemployment, poorer health and rely on income support payments.

A child's education however, does not begin when they start school. Although early experiences do not determine children's ongoing development, the patterns laid down early tend to be very persistent and some have life-long consequences.

High quality early learning and care programs have a clear benefit for children. Every month of preschool attendance after age two is linked to better intellectual development, improved independence, concentration and sociability in the first year of school. The key to whether children benefit from early learning and care is the quality of that care, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds particularly benefitting from high quality programs. Early entry to formal childcare for children at risk, benefits their cognitive and language/linguistic achievements. Conversely, children attending poor quality early learning programs have poorer outcomes at school entry.

Investment in the early years is very cost effective, particularly for disadvantaged children, and far better than remedial approaches that aim to address health, education and wellbeing problems when they emerge in later years.

#### **Recommendation 1**

**Public investment in quality early learning and care should be continued and enhanced given the key benefits, both in the short and long term, to children, their families and Australia.**

### **Australian children's participation in early learning and care**

Despite the benefits of quality early learning and care programs, children from economically disadvantaged families and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, are less likely to attend an early childhood education program than their more advantaged peers or children from non-Indigenous families.

Australia's investment in this area is relatively low compared to the OECD average (0.1% compared with 0.6%). In Australia, a much higher proportion of expenditure in this area comes from private sources compared to the OECD average (44 per cent compared to 18 per cent).

## A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### **Affordability**

Economically disadvantaged families are most likely to be sensitive to childcare costs and their impact on family budgets. The affordability of childcare also impacts on the likelihood of parents, particularly mothers, seeking employment or working to improve their skills in preparation for employment. For those relying on low paid work, particularly if it is part-time, the financial benefits of employment may be less than the costs of childcare, thereby creating significant disincentives for employment.

There are a range of government subsidies and initiatives currently available for families. Notwithstanding this, in 2012, the out-of-pocket costs after Australian Government subsidies, for having one child in long day care, was 8.8 percent of the weekly disposable income of a family with a gross income of \$35,000. This is a significant impost on low income families, particularly if they have multiple children.

### **Recommendation 2**

**That the current financial subsidies relating to childcare be reformed to ensure they are better targeted to disadvantaged and low income families, including where parents/carers are seeking to balance care and employment responsibilities. In particular, the full costs of childcare for children facing multiple disadvantages or who are at risk should be covered, without this imposing participation requirements on parents.**

### **The opportunities afforded by the early learning and care system**

There is a real opportunity to leverage the footprint of the early learning and care system to deliver a range of community and specialist services and supports to children and families. These centres are soft entry points for families and do not have the stigma which is sometimes attached to other service delivery points. The centres also provide an excellent platform for strengthening the knowledge, skills and confidence of parents/carers, as is being achieved through programs such as The Smith Family's *Let's Count*.

#### *Let's Count*

*Let's Count* aims to improve the numeracy and mathematical skills of children aged three to five years as they transition to school. The program trains early years educators to develop their skills, so they can encourage children in their care to explore numeracy in their everyday experiences. It also trains educators to work with parents/carers to develop their knowledge, confidence and skills to

explore numeracy with their children. The pilot of *Let's Count* which was run in disadvantaged communities, showed positive benefits for educators, parents/carers and children and the program is now being expanded through the support of the Origin Foundation.

### *Integrated child and family services*

There is also significant potential to better support young children and families through more integrated and co-located service delivery. This is particularly the case for disadvantaged families, who may need to access multiple supports but find the service system complex or at times stigmatising.

One example of these more models is the Child and Parent Centres that have been established by the Western Australian government, on selected public school sites in vulnerable communities. The Centres are coordinated by a non-government organisation and are for community access and use. They provide programs and services for families and young children from birth to eight years, with a focus on birth to four. The range of services provided depends on the needs of the local community but can include child health checks, parenting information and programs, allied health services and early learning programs. The Centres work closely with the school community and forge strong connections with programs and services delivered at alternative sites by both government and non-government organisation providers.

The location on school premises helps ease the transition to school for families, as they have had much greater exposure to school prior to their child formally commencing there. This is particularly important for parents from disadvantaged backgrounds who may have had previously negative experiences with school, including from their own childhood.

### **Partnerships supporting improved child outcomes**

Initiatives that support parents, families and communities, rather than just focussing on the child, are able to produce a wider range of effects and benefits. *Let's Count* and the Child and Parent Centres are good examples of such initiatives and rely heavily on partnerships, often across different sectors and service systems, in order to maximise their impact.

There are clearly opportunities to improve connections and transitions across early childhood services (including between child care and preschool/kindergarten services), as well as improving connections between schools and communities, through these types of initiatives.

### **Recommendation 3**

**Initiatives that are effectively leveraging the footprint of the early learning and care system and working in partnership to achieve improved outcomes for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, should be further expanded.**

### **National Quality Framework**

The National Framework is in the relatively early stages of implementation, following a long process of development. It is essential that there is consistency in the quality of care provided for all children, regardless of which state/territory they live in or from which sector the child is receiving care.

The quality of care children receive in early learning settings is particularly related to staff's capacity to build relationships with children, families and communities. The Smith Family supports the overall objectives of the National Quality Framework and its emphasis on improving workforce qualifications and child-educator ratios. It is also particularly supportive of the inclusion in the standards of Quality Area 6 – Collaborative partnerships with families and communities – as it is especially important for families from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or those families least likely to access early learning and care settings.

### **Recommendation 4**

**The Smith Family supports the continued implementation of the National Quality Framework as a key platform for improving children's outcomes.**

### **Data on young children**

The development and implementation of the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) has been very important in enabling a much deeper understanding of how Australian children are tracking on key outcome measures. It will remain a critical source of data over time if Australia is to be able to track improvements in children's outcomes and the efficacy of program and policy interventions.

### **Recommendation 5**

**That the Commonwealth continue to fund the implementation of the AEDI on a regular basis and the wide dissemination of the data, as a key platform for improving the outcomes of Australia's children.**

### **Recommendation 6**

**That consideration be given to the setting of a national target for the reduction of the proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable when they start school, as measured by the AEDI.**

### Introduction

#### The Smith Family

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into *Childcare and Early Childhood Learning*. The Smith Family is a national charity which has provided support to disadvantaged children, young people and families for over 90 years. Our mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their participation in education.

Our work focuses on a range of programs across the life stage of a child - from the early pre-school years through to school and tertiary education. In 2012-13, we supported 112,124 children, young people and parents/carers in 96 communities across Australia. This included 26, 429 children under 5 and their parents through our early years programs, such as *Let's Read* and *Let's Count*.

We also support a range of families with young children through our role as a Facilitating Partner in nine sites through the Commonwealth Government's *Communities for Children* initiative. In 2012-13, our *Communities for Children* sites supported 8,639 children in the zero to four age range, including 1,588 who were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

Given The Smith Family's focus, this submission will address in particular the following Terms of Reference for the Inquiry:

- 1b. The contribution that access to affordable, high quality child care can make to optimising children's learning and development.
2. The current and future need for child care in Australia, including consideration of the following:
  - i. the capacity of the existing child care system to ensure children are transitioning from child care to school with a satisfactory level of school preparedness
  - j. opportunities to improve connections and transitions across early childhood services (including between child care and preschool/kindergarten services).
  - k. the needs of vulnerable or at risk children.

## C. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EARLY YEARS

### Education and the foundations of the early years

The economic and social consequences of poor educational outcomes are severe for the individual, their family and Australia as a whole. Young people with poor educational outcomes are more likely to experience unemployment, poorer health and rely on income support payments<sup>1</sup>. The consequences of this are particularly borne by the Commonwealth Government, given its responsibility for the national economy, employment services and income support.

A child's education however, does not begin when they start school. Although early experiences do not **determine** children's ongoing development, the **patterns** laid down early tend to be very persistent and some have life-long consequences (Harrison et al, 2012). Many of the foundations for later educational, employment, health and emotional wellbeing and success, are laid in the period before a child starts school.

The Australian Government's recently produced resource sheet on early learning programs (Harrison et al, 2012) provides an excellent summary of the importance of the early years, and in particular their significance for children from disadvantaged backgrounds:

- The skills children develop as infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers are cumulative and form the basis for later skill development. Early learning contributes to a chain of effects that either reinforces initial achievements or exacerbates initial difficulties.
  - Children's literacy and numeracy skills at age 4-5 are a good predictor of academic achievement in primary school.
  - Social gradients in language and literacy, communication and socio-emotional functioning emerge early for children across socioeconomic backgrounds, and these differences persist into the school years.
- (Harrison et al, 2012)

### The benefits of early learning and care programs

Australian and international research is also clear on the benefit of early learning and care programs, including for children at risk of poor outcomes:

- Exposure to an early learning program in the year before school entry has a positive effect on children's "school readiness".
- Sustained and regular preschool or formal childcare provides greater benefits for children's learning. Every month of preschool attendance after age two is linked to better intellectual development, improved independence, concentration and sociability in the first year of school.

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<sup>1</sup> It has been estimated for example that poor literacy costs Australia \$18.35 billion or 2% of GDP (Cree et al, 2012)

## C. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EARLY YEARS

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- Early entry to formal childcare for children at risk benefits their cognitive and language/linguistic achievements.  
(Harrison et al, 2012)

### **The importance of quality in early learning and care programs**

Accumulated evidence from Australian and international research, including the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children, highlights the key role that the **quality** of the childcare plays, in ensuring the positive development of young children (Harrison, 2008). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds particularly benefit from high quality programs. Conversely, children attending poor quality early learning programs have poorer outcomes at school entry. This is particularly the case when poor quality programs are combined with poorer home learning environments or long hours of attendance (Harrison et al, 2012).

Characteristics which have been identified as being features of effective early learning programs include:

- The integration of care and education.
- An underpinning regulatory standards and systems for quality assurance.
- Early childhood educators who are qualified, well-resourced and supported.
- On going professional development, training and coaching occurs to staff.
- Parents, families and communities are involved and supported through the programs.

(Harrison et al, 2012)

### **Participation in early learning and care programs**

Despite the benefits of quality early learning and care programs, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage, children from economically disadvantaged families and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, are less likely to attend an early childhood education program than their more advantaged peers or children from non-Indigenous families (Harrison et al, 2012). Nationally in 2012 (excluding Queensland)<sup>2</sup>, 13.9 percent of children aged 4 and 5 years who were enrolled in a preschool program, lived in an area which was highly disadvantaged<sup>3</sup>. However 21 percent of Australian children in this age group live in these highly disadvantaged areas. Further, there is a bigger gap between the enrolment and attendance rates for disadvantaged children in this age group, than there is for all children<sup>4</sup> (SCRGSP 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> Child level enrolment and attendance for Queensland are not available.

<sup>3</sup> That is, they lived in an area which was in the lowest quintile on the SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage.

<sup>4</sup> While the proportion of children enrolled in these areas is 13.9% the proportion attending is 12.2%. Further data is available from Table 3A.15 (SCRGSP 2014).

## C. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EARLY YEARS

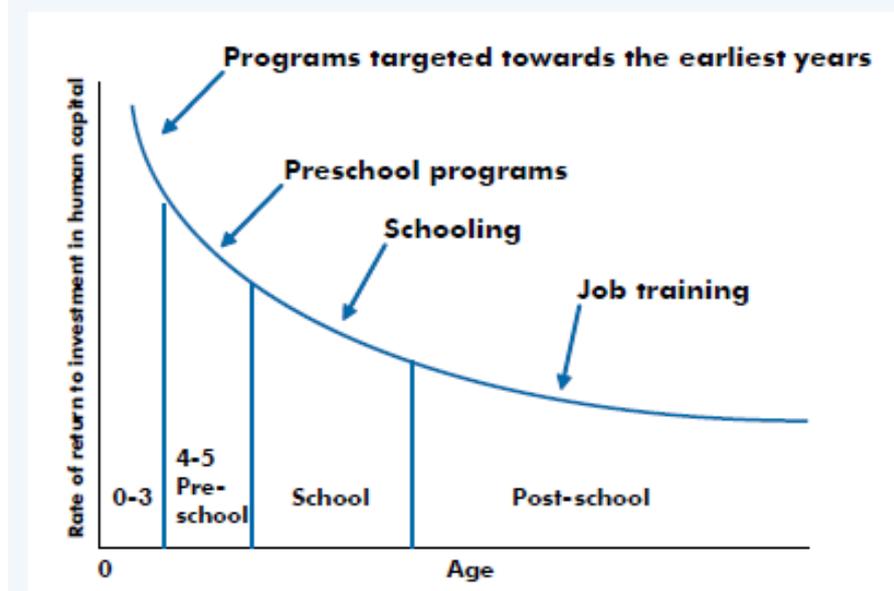
### The economic benefits of investing in the early years

Interventions in the early years are very cost effective, particularly for disadvantaged children, as noted by Nobel Economist James Heckman:

Investment and interventions in the early years are generally more cost effective in improving outcomes than investments later in life. Particularly those preventative programmes aimed at disadvantaged children.<sup>5</sup>

#### Rate of return to investment in human capital<sup>6</sup>

(a) Return to a unit dollar invested at different ages from the perspective of the beginning of life, assuming one dollar initially invested at each age



...s programs, current expenditure in Australia on pre-primary education is 0.1% of GDP, which is relatively low compared to the OECD average of 0.6%. In Australia a much higher proportion of expenditure in this area comes from private sources, compared to the OECD average (44 per cent compared to 18 per cent) (OECD, 2013)<sup>7</sup>.

### Australian children starting school

The transition to school is a significant one for both the child and their family, and children's 'readiness' for school is predictive of academic success during the school years, and long-term academic and occupational success (Rosier and Mc

<sup>5</sup> J Heckman, "The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children" in First Focus, *Big Ideas for Children; Investing in Our Nation's Future*,

<sup>6</sup> J Heckman, "The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children" in: First Focus, *Big Ideas for Children; Investing in Our Nation's Future*, p52.

<sup>7</sup> It is acknowledged that Australia does however spend more on average per student on each pre-primary student (\$US 8,899 pa in 2010), compared to the OECD average (US \$6,762).

## C. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EARLY YEARS

Donald, 2011). Transition to school does not happen at a single point in time, but rather is a pathway that commences well before school begins and continues on through the first years of school (Rosier and Mc Donald, 2011). The former means early learning and care settings are particularly important in terms of how children and their families transition to school.

In Australia, four groups have been identified as finding the transition to school particularly challenging:

- Financially disadvantaged families – due in part, to the impact of financial stress on family relationships, and these families’ more limited ability to invest in advantageous experiences and environments that maximise children’s cognitive outcomes.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- Families of children with a disability
- Culturally and linguistically diverse families. (Rosier and Mc Donald, 2011)

The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) provides a measure of how Australian children are developing in their first year of school, so is insightful both to inform efforts in the early learning and care and transition to school settings. The 2012 AEDI indicates that one in five Australian children were developmentally vulnerable in one or more key areas in their first year of school, and one in 10 children were developmentally vulnerable in two or more key areas. Further, two in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains. The 2009 AEDI data<sup>8</sup> also indicated that 32.0 percent of children living in Australia’s most disadvantaged communities were developmental vulnerable.

As children progress through school, educational outcomes for children from low-socio economic or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, continue to be worse than for their peers, as indicated by the Year 5 and Year 9 NAPLAN data in Table 1.

**Table 1: Percentage of students below national minimum reading standards, NAPLAN, 2012**

	All students (%)	Students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Students whose parents’ highest

<sup>8</sup> The equivalent analysis for 2012 has not yet been released publicly.

## C. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EARLY YEARS



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		backgrounds (%)	education was Year 11 or below (%) <sup>9</sup>
Year 5	6.4	32.4	15.0
Year 9	7.0	30.1	15.6

ACARA, 2012

These gaps in educational outcomes continue with Year 12 completion and post-school participation in education, training and employment.

- There is a 20 percent difference in the proportion of young people from low socio-economic backgrounds and those from high socio-economic backgrounds who attain Year 12 or equivalent (73.7% compared with 93.2%), and only 54 percent of Indigenous young Australians complete Year 12 or equivalent (COAG Reform Council, 2013).
- Two in five 17 to 24 year olds from low socio-economic backgrounds and over 60 percent of those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds are not fully engaged in work or study (COAG Reform Council, 2013).

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<sup>9</sup> This is a measure of low socio-economic background.

### **The opportunities afforded by the early learning and care system**

Strengthening Australia's early learning and care system is an important step in improving educational and employment outcomes for young Australians generally, and particularly those experiencing disadvantage. Such improvements would have very important follow on economic and social benefits to Australia. It has been estimated for example, that if the proportion of young children who were starting school developmentally vulnerable was reduced from 22 percent to 15 percent by 2020, there would be an increase in Australia's GDP of 7.35 percent over 60 years (ARACY, 2013). The cumulative positive economic impact over time of reducing children's vulnerability to poor outcomes is therefore very significant.

High quality early learning and care programs provide a significant opportunity to improve the educational and developmental outcomes of children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a real opportunity to leverage the footprint of the early learning and care system, to deliver a range of community and specialist services and supports to children and families. These centres are soft entry points for families and do not have the stigma which is sometimes attached to other service delivery points. The centres can also provide an excellent platform for strengthening the knowledge, skills and confidence of parents/carers, as is being achieved through programs such as The Smith Family's *Let's Count*.

#### *Let's Count*

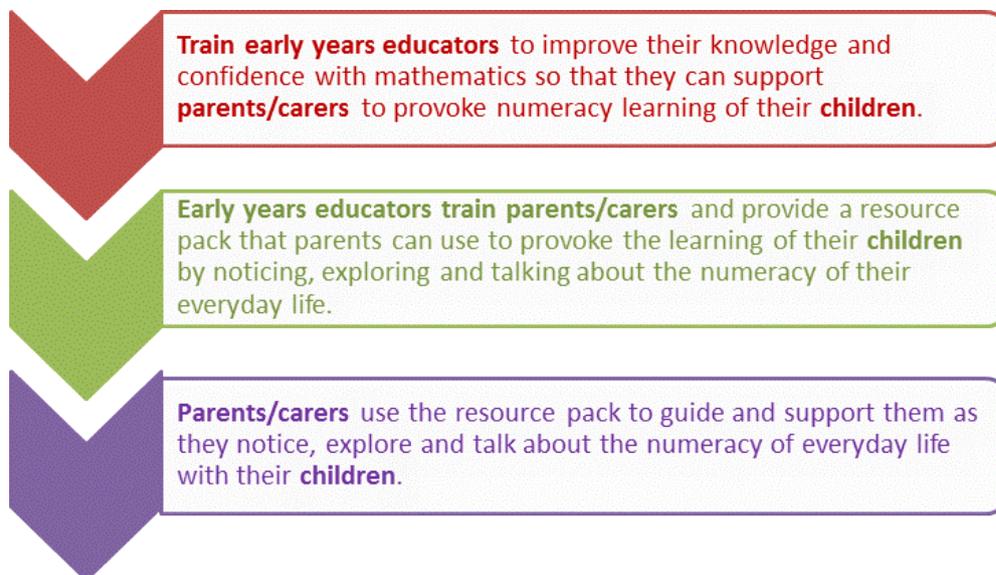
The *Let's Count* program was developed by The Smith Family in collaboration with Professor Bob Perry from Charles Sturt University and Dr Ann Gervasoni from the Australian Catholic University. It was prompted, in part, by data from the AEDI indicating that significant proportions of children were beginning school developmentally vulnerable in the area of numeracy. *Let's Count* aims to improve the numeracy and mathematical skills of children aged three to five years as they transition to school.

The program trains early years educators to develop their skills, so they can encourage children in their care to explore numeracy in their everyday experiences. It also trains early years educators to work with parents/carers to develop their knowledge, confidence and skills to use everyday experiences to explore numeracy with their children. This acknowledges the role that parents have, as the first and primary educator of their children.

As part of the program, early childhood educators receive a two day professional learning program, with each day delivered approximately 4 to 6 weeks apart. Parents then receive formal and informal training from the early childhood educator through the early learning and care setting, as well as a parent resource

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pack with practical ideas to try at home. The logic of *Let's Count* is provided below.



*Let's Count* was piloted in 2011-12 across sites in five disadvantaged communities, involving 64 educators mainly from early childhood and care settings. The evaluation of the program showed promising results, including that early years educators:

- were much more likely to like maths after the program
- attitudes and confidence regarding mathematics and teaching strategies were improved
- increased their expectations about young children's mathematical capability.
- engaged more with parents about maths
- saw parents were more engaged with their children about maths
- thought the children in their care were seeing maths as more fun than previously
- would recommend the program to others

Let's Count pilot program evaluation report, 2012, unpublished.

As early years educators involved in *Let's Count* have noted:

*I didn't realise just how much maths was involved in everyday activities.*

*I'm not confident with my maths abilities but with today's session and the resources given to us, I feel I can provide support to children learning maths.*

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*It's been a wonderful addition to our program...it involved parents with their children at home and encouraged communication back and forwards between children, staff and parents.*

Following the success of the pilot, *Let's Count* is being expanded to 18 disadvantaged communities throughout Australia, through the support of the Origin Foundation. Included in the expansion is a longitudinal research study, which is assessing the impact of the program, in particular on the children participating as they transition to school.

The delivery of *Let's Count* through early childhood education and care centres, leverages the footprint of this sector, builds on the skills of staff working in the sector and provides a potentially universal platform for strengthening parents' confidence in engaging with their children around mathematics. Using the early childhood education and care setting for delivering a range of initiatives aimed at enhancing the wellbeing of young children, especially those experiencing disadvantage, is both effective and efficient.

### **Integrated child and family services**

In addition to the opportunities provided by early learning and care centres to facilitate access to programs such as *Let's Count*, there is also significant potential to better support children and families through more integrated and co-located service delivery. This is particularly the case for disadvantaged families, who may need to access multiple supports, but find the service system complex or at times stigmatising.

There are a range of more integrated models that are being implemented in communities across Australia. Some have been funded by the Commonwealth, State/Territory or Local Governments, some by philanthropy or non-government organisations, and some rely on a combination of multiple funding sources. These models also offer significant opportunity to link families to school much earlier than in the first year of formal schooling, and so can potentially contribute to improved transition to school, both for the child and the family as a whole. Many of these models have a particular focus on working in communities of disadvantage.

One example of these more integrated models are the Child and Parent Centres that have been established by the Western Australian government, on selected public school sites in vulnerable communities. The Centres are coordinated by a non-government organisation, (The Smith Family is coordinating two of the Centres) and while located on public school sites, they are for community access and use. They provide programs and services for families and young children from birth to eight years (with a focus on birth to four). The range of services provided

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depends on the needs of the local community, but can include antenatal education, child health checks, parenting information and programs, allied health services and early learning programs with parental involvement, such as playgroups. The Centres work closely with the school community and forge strong connections with programs and services delivered at alternative sites by both government and non-government organisation providers. Thus its delivery model is a hub and spoke one, in order to maximise reach and impact.

The location on school premises can ease the transition to school for families, as they will have had much greater exposure to school through involvement in activities delivered through the Child and Parent Centres. This can increase their level of comfort and familiarity with the school environment and personnel. This is particularly important for parents from disadvantaged backgrounds who may have had previously negative experiences with school, including from their own childhood.

These types of models are making important contributions to efforts across Australia aimed at improving children's early learning and developmental outcomes and improving their transition to school. They merit further examination and expansion.

### **Partnerships supporting improved child outcomes**

What is clear from both *Let's Count* and the Child and Parent Centres, as well as the research more generally on effective early learning programs, is that initiatives that support parents, families and communities (rather than just focussing on the child), are able to produce a wider range of effects and benefits (Harrison et al, 2012). *Let's Count* and the Child and Parent Centres rely heavily on partnerships, often across different sectors and service systems, in order to maximise their impact.

The Smith Family believes that there are opportunities to improve connections and transitions across early childhood services (including between child care and preschool/kindergarten services), as well as improving connections between schools and communities, through these types of initiatives and recommends that there be a greater focus on supporting such approaches more consistently across Australia, particularly in communities experiencing disadvantage.

### **Affordability**

Given the clear evidence of the benefits of quality early learning and care programs, particularly for disadvantaged children, the issues of access and affordability are critical. As identified above, economically disadvantaged families are less likely than their more affluent peers to participate in early childhood

programs. These families are most likely to be sensitive to childcare costs and their impact on family budgets.

The affordability of childcare also impacts on the likelihood of parents, particularly mothers, seeking employment or to improve their skills in preparation for employment. For those reliant on low paid work, particularly if it is part-time, the financial benefits of employment may be less than the costs of childcare, thereby creating significant disincentives to employment. This is despite the fact that as the 2010 Commonwealth Review of Taxation noted “extended absences from the labour market tend to affect a person’s longer-term labour market prospects, with detrimental effects on longer term outcomes for both children and their parents, especially women”.

There are a range of government subsidies and initiatives currently available for families, including in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Notwithstanding this, in 2012, the out-of-pocket costs after Australian Government subsidies, for having one child in long day care, was 8.8 percent of the weekly disposable income of a family earning a gross income of \$35,000 (DEEWR, 2013). This is a significant impost on low income families, particularly if they have multiple children<sup>10</sup>.

The Smith Family would therefore urge reform of existing financial subsidies to ensure they are better targeted to disadvantaged and low income families, including where parents/carers are seeking to balance care and employment responsibilities. In particular, as recommended by the Commonwealth Review of Taxation, the full costs of childcare for children facing multiple disadvantages or who are at risk should be covered, without this imposing participation requirements on parents.

### **National Quality Framework**

The National Framework is in the relatively early stages of implementation, following a long process of development. The Framework makes explicit to all stakeholders, including families, providers, funders and the broader community, national standards that are aimed at improving the quality of education and care across long day care, family day care, preschool/kindergarten, and outside school hours care.

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<sup>10</sup> It should also be noted that there are Australian families who would a gross income of less than \$35,000.

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It is very appropriate that the Commonwealth has responsibility for the National Framework as it is essential that there is consistency of care provided for all children, regardless of which state/territory they live in or from which sector the child is receiving care.

As identified above, the quality of care children receive in these settings is particularly related to staff's capacity to build relationships with children, families and communities. The Smith Family supports the overall objectives of the Framework and its emphasis on improving workforce qualifications and child-educator ratios. The importance of workforce qualifications has been highlighted through recent analysis of NAPLAN Year 3 data. Children who attended a pre-school program with a degree or diploma qualified teacher, specialising in early childhood education or child care, gained the most from attending pre-school, when looking at NAPLAN Year 3 results (Warren D and Haisken-DeNew, 2013).

In addition to the qualifications area outlined in the National Quality Framework, The Smith Family is particularly supportive of the inclusion in the standards of Quality Area 6 – Collaborative partnerships with families and communities – as while this is important for all families, it is especially important for families from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or those families least likely to access early learning and care settings. The ability to develop collaborative partnerships with families and communities has been central to the success of *Let's Count* and the Child and Parent Centres.

The Smith Family therefore supports the ongoing implementation of the National Quality Framework as a central platform for improving the wellbeing of all young children, especially those experiencing disadvantage.

### **Data on young children**

The development and implementation of the Australian Early Development Index has been very important in enabling a much deeper understanding of how Australian children are tracking on key outcome measures. The fact that this data is available at a community level and is being collected at regular intervals, is a particularly strong feature of the Index. This allows targeted responses to be developed that are relevant to individual communities, as well as changes in outcomes to be tracked over time.

The Smith Family strongly supports the continued funding by the Commonwealth of the implementation of the AEDI on a regular basis and the wide dissemination of the data, as a key platform for improving the outcomes of Australia's children.

## D. OPPORTUNITIES AND ISSUES

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Consideration should also be given to the setting of a national target for the reduction of the proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable when they start school, as measured by the AEDI.

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