
13 Workforce for family support services

Key points

- All levels of government fund a large number of family support programs. Though differing in structure and methods, these programs are guided by COAG's National Early Childhood Development Strategy and share the common goal of improving families' capacity to care for their children.
- The workers who deliver family support services are drawn from the early childhood education and care, nursing, allied health and community services workforces with most workers' knowledge about family support practice coming from their initial training. Volunteers and peer mentors also play a significant role in some programs.
- Although recent improvements are promising, there are still few data available on the family support workforce. This reduces governments' ability to effectively plan and deliver family support services.
- The demand for workers to provide family support services is primarily driven by government funding and policy priorities, with individual recruitment decisions largely made by non-government organisations. Thus there is considerable variation in demand for different types of workers across and within jurisdictions.
- The supply of workers for family support programs is highly dependent on the employment opportunities available to those workers in their primary area of expertise (for example, opportunities for social workers to work in community services). Due to different award structures and insecure program funding, employment in family support programs is often the less attractive option. Services that provide family support therefore require increased funding for longer periods, so that they can plan their workforce with confidence, invest in training, pay market wages (including relevant future award increases) and attract and retain staff.
- Preceding chapters have shown that demand for most ECD workers is likely to exceed supply in the short term. As workers in family support programs are largely drawn from the same pool of workers, demand for workers in family support programs is also expected to exceed supply under current policy settings.
- There is limited high-quality evidence about the effectiveness of many family support programs, and directing more resources towards evaluations would have benefits in the long term. There may be potential for the provision of additional family support services through the use of volunteers.

Family environment plays a crucial role in the cognitive, social and emotional development of young children. Indeed, in its systematic review of parenting programs for parents of young children, the Cochrane Collaboration found that:

There is an increasing body of research indicating that the quality of the parent–infant relationship in particular creates the conditions for establishing healthy patterns of functioning in childhood and adulthood. ... insecure attachment prior to age 2 is related to a range of poor outcomes including conduct problems, low sociability, poor peer relations, symptoms of anger, and poor behavioural self-control during the preschool years and to adolescent anxiety, dissociation, drug use, and delinquency ... This may indicate a role for early interventions designed to improve parent–infant interaction in particular, and parenting practices more generally. (Barlow and Parsons 2007, pp. 2–3)

The role of family support as part of broader early childhood development (ECD) programs is further considered in appendix F. In light of this demonstrated need, a range of family support services have been established, some of which provide assistance with housing, employment, financial management and parental relationships. While acknowledging the important role of such services, the Commission has limited its focus on family support services to those that aim to improve the capacity of families to care for their children. This focus aligns with the definition of family support services used by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2001).

13.1 The workforce for family support services

Family support services are diverse and fragmented

Governments in Australia have an ongoing commitment to fund a wide range of family support programs and services (COAG 2009c), many of which are delivered by non-government organisations (NGOs). Each State and Territory funds, and in some cases directly provides, a range of family support services. For instance, 25 family support projects funded or provided by State and Territory Governments were identified by the Australian Health Ministers' Conference and Community & Disability Services Ministers' Conference (AHMC and CDSMC 2006). Similarly, the Australian Government will fund 160 projects through its Family Support Program in 2010-11 (FaHCSIA 2010b).

The large number of different family support and parenting programs leads to diversity in their messages, with a review conducted for the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs identifying 126 parenting initiatives with 98 separate key messages (MCEECDYA 2010a). The diversity of family support services can also be seen in the wide range of programs and services considered to be 'promising' by the Australian Institute of Family

Studies (AIFS 2011b). The ‘promising practices’ range from literacy programs, parenting education and home visits, to music therapy, supported playgroups and circus workshops (box 13.1). Other promising programs, such as the Brighter Futures program in New South Wales, involve assisting vulnerable families to access mainstream early childhood education and care (ECEC) services (Benevolent Society, sub. 49; NSW Government, sub. 79; UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families, sub. 62).

Box 13.1 Examples of the diversity of family support programs

Sing and Grow

Sing and Grow is a music therapy project that provides group programs in the community for mums, dads and carers with young children. We usually meet once a week for about an hour, for 10 weeks. We use percussion instruments, drums, ribbons, balls and parachutes, along with singing known and new songs, to increase positive interactions between parents and their children, enhance child development, build social support networks and increase parents’ confidence to use music as play at home. (Playgroup Queensland 2011)

Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY)

HIPPY is a 2-year, home-based, early childhood enrichment program for preschool children that targets communities [that] have experienced various forms of social disadvantage. It provides intensive education and support to parents with children up to 5 years of age, using tutors that work with both parents and children within their homes. The tutors are chosen from participating families in the program and hence provide peer support. The program enables parents to spend more time with their children in activities that enhance cognitive development, social/emotional development, stimulate positive parent/child interactions, and empower parents to view themselves as primary educators of their children. (AIFS 2011a)

Brimbank Children’s Circus Project

The Brimbank Children’s Circus Project provides a rich environment where children aged 3–5 years are immersed in physical play, oral language, visual stimulation and interaction with a key adult in their lives. The combination of circus activities, a strong literacy and numeracy concept and a community learning approach, enables children and their families to experience literacy through a positive and universal approach and responds to the National Strategy for Literacy and Learning in a new and exciting way. (Westside Circus 2011)

Psycho-Educational Program for Parents

The Psycho-Educational Program for Parents program is an innovative mental health promotion intervention for universal application in primary care with fathers, mothers and their first newborns. It addresses two under-recognised risk factors for postnatal psychological disturbance: quality of relationship with partner; and management of infant crying, sleep and settling. The 2-session program [is] conducted in half-day seminars by maternal and child health nurses. (AIFS 2011d)

Family support services are delivered in a variety of ways. In addition to face-to-face services, parenting helplines in each jurisdiction allow parents to access support over the phone (Kids Helpline nd). In some jurisdictions, mobile family support services are provided to families who are isolated by geographic, social, cultural or economic factors (Mobile Children's Services Association of NSW, sub. 38).

As well as differing in their methods, family support services differ in the specific focus of their efforts. While services generally aim to enhance child development and to improve child and family outcomes, other common objectives include:

- preventing child abuse and maltreatment
- preventing delinquency and crime in future years
- enhancing family relationships
- fostering community development and integration
- assisting culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families and families of children with disabilities with their specific needs.

Most family support programs aim to achieve several of these objectives, with many specifically targeting disadvantaged or vulnerable families. Despite this focus, families of young children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are much less likely than those from a higher socioeconomic background to have used community support services for their children (Blakemore, cited in McCarthur et al. 2010).

A wide range of workers deliver family support programs

The diversity of family support services means that a wide range of workers are involved in their provision. They include:

- child health nurses
- preschool teachers and other ECEC workers
- social workers, family support workers and other welfare professionals
- psychologists and other allied health professionals
- other professionals, such as counsellors, music therapists and social scientists
- volunteers, including neighbours and peers.

Many programs are delivered by a combination of different professions and workers. For instance, the Intensive Family Support Program in NSW is delivered and managed by workers with a degree in either social work or psychology (NSW

Human Services 2010). Other programs are delivered in a multidisciplinary fashion, or place an emphasis on training workers in the unique methods of a particular program, regardless of the workers' professional backgrounds (for example, the Positive Parenting Program known as Triple P). Some family support programs, such as South Australia's Learning Together @ Home program, are delivered by unqualified workers (Government of South Australia, sub. 66).

NIFTeY NSW considered the presence of a wide variety of skills in the family support workforce to be beneficial, because different workers can help to support different domains of a child's development (sub. 36). Similarly, the Benevolent Society considered that:

It is important to acknowledge that no one profession can adequately address all the needs of a child and their family nor can one ECD worker provide a full suite of services to the child's family. A comprehensive program requires a diverse and experienced team of professionals including psychologists, social workers, early educators, child and family health nurses, infant mental health specialists, speech and occupational therapists. (Benevolent Society, sub. 49, p. 23)

This diversity adds considerably to the difficulty of defining and analysing the workforce for family support services. However, although the evidence base on family support programs is limited, it suggests that the diverse and flexible service delivery model, common to many Australian programs, is associated with improved outcomes (box 13.2).

Characteristics of the workforce for family support services

Few datasets provide information about the workers who deliver family support programs. Though most family support programs employ health and community services staff, data on the health and community services workforces, such as that reported by the AIHW, do not permit workers in family support services to be separately identified (AIHW 2009b). So while the number of social workers or psychologists is known, it is not possible ascertain how many of these professionals work in family support services.

Box 13.2 The evidence base for family support programs

The effectiveness of several family support programs, including the Positive Parenting Program (known as Triple P) (Markie-Dadds and Sanders 2006) and the Nurse Home Visiting Program (Olds et al. 2007), has been demonstrated in high-quality studies (see box 12.2).

However, international experience suggests that most family support and parent education programs have shown only modest impacts or have been effective for some at-risk populations but not others (Bruner 2004; Layzer et al. 2001). Moreover, very little is known about the 'active ingredients' of effective programs (Barrett 2010), making them difficult to replicate elsewhere. In Australia, there is also little evidence about the applicability and effectiveness of different family support programs (Wise et al. 2005).

However, despite the relative lack of evidence, the literature suggests that:

The most successful parent education programs contained targeted recruitment [of families]; a structured and lengthy program; a combination of interventions/strategies; and a strengths-based approach. The most successful home-visiting programs were delivered by highly trained professionals (for example, nurses); contained targeted recruitment strategies; program goals that matched client needs; and were designed to improve both maternal and child wellbeing. (Holzer et al. 2006, p. 21)

Other broad areas of consensus indicate that:

- relationships between workers and families are more important than program structure or curriculums, with high rates of staff turnover having a negative impact on relationships and program effectiveness
- different programs work in different contexts, with the most effective services targeting the 'right' intervention to the 'right' audience.

Survey of the community services sector — general community services

A survey of the community services sector (SCS), recently published by the National Institute of Labour Studies (Martin and Healy 2010), provides the best available picture of employment in family support services (box 13.3).

Box 13.3 The survey of community services (SCS)

The statistics on the family support workforce cited in this chapter are from a recently published survey of community services (SCS) by the National Institute of Labour Studies (Martin and Healy 2010). The SCS provides detailed and previously unavailable data on workers in the general community services sector (defined as those who deliver social support and assistance to families). The SCS therefore provides the best available data on workers delivering family support programs.

The SCS is based on a sample of 356 service providers and 1275 workers. It disaggregates workers into the following categories.

- *Non-professionals*: Family, youth or child support workers; carers in homes and refuges; customer service and referral workers.
- *Professionals*: Allied health workers; social workers; case managers.
- *Managers and Administrators*: Service and program administrators; managers and coordinators.

Like all surveys, the SCS can be affected by sampling and non-sampling errors, which should be borne in mind when interpreting the statistics in this chapter. The survey sampled around 740 of about 4000 general community services outlets, and achieved a response rate of 48 per cent (356 providers) — a high response rate compared to most surveys. That said, there is some risk of non-response error because the number of employees may influence the probability of responding to the survey (that is, larger organisations may have administrative staff better able to respond to survey questions). In addition, there is no clearly accepted listing of general community services or family support providers. That could bias results if the number of employees in an agency influences the probability of that agency being discovered for inclusion in the sample frame (that is, it may be easier to find large, well-known organisations than small ones). However, Martin and Healy (2010) used a thorough search method to construct the sample frame, so this risk is probably low.

Overall, the SCS yields the best available evidence describing the general community services workforce and, by inference, the family support services workforce. However, as is the case with all surveys, data about aggregates such as the total number of workers in the industry will be less reliable than data describing the characteristics of workers.

Sources: Martin and Healy (2010); PC (2011b).

The SCS defines general community services to include social support and assistance services provided directly to children and families, with the exception of child protection, juvenile justice, disability services and services directed specifically at the aged, at providing housing or supported accommodation, and crisis services (Martin and Healy 2010). This definition of general community services appears similar to, although slightly broader than, the Commission's definition of family support services (in that it includes services that do not directly

aim to improve families' capacity to care for children, such as counselling or advice on matters unrelated to parenting). The SCS data on the general community services workforce therefore include the family support services workforce, and provide the best available information on this workforce.

Around 32 200 people were employed in Australia to provide general community services in 2009, of whom 23 900 worked in direct contact roles. When part-time employment is taken into account, this workforce was equivalent to about 18 100 full-time workers (12 300 of whom are direct providers). Of these workers:

- 35 per cent were non-professional workers, 33 per cent were professional staff and 21 per cent were managers and coordinators (in equivalent full-time terms)
- 83 per cent were women
- 42 per cent were employed on a permanent full-time basis, and 39 per cent were employed on a permanent part-time basis
- three quarters of professionals and 53 per cent of managers/administrators held at least a bachelor degree, while nearly 80 per cent of non-professionals had at least a certificate III qualification. Qualifications were generally in areas such as social work, psychology or counselling, youth work, and community work
- 85 per cent worked for not-for-profit service providers, with government employing the remainder
- 68 per cent expected to still to be working in general community services three years after they were surveyed.

There was considerable variation in the age of the general community services workforce, although mature aged workers predominated. Fifteen per cent were under 30 and 62 per cent were 40 years or over (compared to 29 per cent and 49 per cent of the Australian female workforce respectively).

Study participants confirmed some of these findings, including that the family support workforce is predominantly female and includes a high proportion of part-time workers (Benevolent Society, sub. 49; Playgroup Queensland, sub. 9).

While the SCS data are a welcome addition to the knowledge base on the family support workforce, it is somewhat surprising that these data have not been systematically collected and published by funders of family support programs, to inform their consideration of future program requirements. New South Wales has made progress in this regard, sponsoring a 'profile' of non-government community service organisations which includes consideration of workforce characteristics (Hilferty et al. 2010). Despite positive developments such as this, the scarcity of workforce data has carried through to evaluations of family support programs,

which have typically focused on workers' personal qualities and attributes and their contribution to program effectiveness. Comparatively little attention has been given to the demographic characteristics, professional background or employment status of workers in those programs, limiting the workforce lessons from previous investments in family support programs.

13.2 Demand for workers to provide family support services

Governments and NGOs determine demand for workers in family support services

Demand for workers with qualifications and skills

The number and types of workers employed in family support programs is, to a large extent, determined by government funding priorities. The decision to fund or not to fund certain types of programs will affect demand for workers with the skills to deliver those programs. For instance, the establishment of the Australian Nurse–Family Partnership Program (ANFPP) has led to a large increase in demand for nurses with experience in child health and the ability to work in partnership with Indigenous families (see chapter 12 for more information on the ANFPP).

Decisions about recruitment of individual workers are largely made by NGOs. However, NGOs' discretion in staffing and recruitment can be limited, as governments are increasingly specifying inputs as well as outputs of family support programs. In other words, 'the qualifications and skills required of family support staff are determined by the model that the NGOs are contracted to deliver' (UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families, sub. 62, p. 14).

The demand for workers in family support services varies geographically, even between suburbs of major cities. This is driven by demographic factors such as the differing socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of these areas. The particular skills required of staff also vary, depending on factors such as the concentration of families from CALD backgrounds within a particular area (City of Salisbury, sub. DR178).

In rural and remote areas, many services are required to work in an integrated and flexible manner. For instance, mobile services are called on to support both children and parents on developmental issues, and so may need cross-disciplinary staff with skills in both early childhood development and family support (Mobile Children's Services Association of NSW, sub. 38). The demand for workers with

cross-disciplinary skills may therefore be higher in rural and remote areas, which may in turn be one reason why providers of family support services reported difficulty in attracting staff to rural areas (Benevolent Society, sub. 49; Early Childhood Intervention Australia (NSW Chapter), sub. 25; Northcott Disability Services, sub. 18).

However, regardless of location, staff in family support services need a wide range of skills.

As our work becomes increasingly complex, staff need to have a breadth of skills and experience and it is often difficult to find and attract appropriately qualified and experienced people. ... Occupations that were particularly difficult to recruit for were case managers and psychologists. (Benevolent Society, sub. 49, p. 14)

Demand for workers with personal qualities and connections

Evaluations of family support programs suggest that workers' personal qualities may be at least as important as their formal qualifications. The ability to listen, empathise and work with a non-judgemental attitude have been shown to be essential characteristics (Muir et al. 2009). Staff who lack relevant personal attributes are unlikely to be able to effectively support families. For instance, some of the qualified family support staff employed by the 'Pathways to Prevention' project in Brisbane were rejected by communities because they were considered to be too young or were not parents themselves (Homel et al. 2006).

Programs for Indigenous and CALD families also require workers with specialist cultural skills, as 'connection with the community is an important element in the success of these [family support] roles, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD communities' (SDN Children's Services, sub. 31, p. 3).

Given the importance of personal qualities and cultural understanding, there appears to be potential for greater involvement in family support programs of peers and volunteers, who are likely to have the required qualities and skills. This is discussed in further detail below.

Trends in demand for different types of family support workers

Some study participants submitted that limitations on funding have restricted demand for family support staff in recent years (for instance, UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families, sub. 62). However, it is hard to be certain of overall funding trends because programs are funded for short periods and are renamed and changed on a regular basis.

Making accurate predictions of future demand for different types of family support workers is made more difficult by the relatively sparse evidence base for the effectiveness of family support services (box 13.2 above). Strengthening the evidence base for different programs may shape future demand in unforeseen ways.

There are nevertheless some emerging trends in family support practice, although their effects on workforce demand are uncertain. For example, there has been increased emphasis on home visiting, with the creation of the ANFPP and the expansion of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) program (DEEWR nde). While both ANFPP and HIPPY aim to use home visitors to improve child development, they rely on different types of workers. ANFPP will increase demand for child health nurses, while HIPPY uses trained visitors who are often past participants of the program (box 13.1 above).

There has also been a trend towards integration of children's services, including the provision of early learning, child care and parent and family support services to Indigenous families at integrated Children and Family Centres. The effects of service integration on workforce demand are considered in chapter 15.

13.3 Supply of workers to provide family support services

The supply of workers for family support programs depends on opportunities for these workers in their area of expertise (generally in other parts of the ECEC, health or community services sectors), opportunities in family support and the relative attractiveness of employment in each setting. Government policy changes in other sectors can therefore have a substantial effect on the supply of staff for family support services.

Remuneration

Level

Several study participants considered that remuneration levels for workers in family support services are too low (Early Childhood Intervention Australia (NSW Chapter), sub. 25; Playgroup Queensland, sub. 9) or have not kept pace with wage growth in other sectors (Department for Communities (WA), sub. 59). Available evidence, while limited, goes some way towards confirming this, with employees in the family support sector receiving relatively low rates of pay compared to those in other sectors.

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- The SCS found that the mean hourly wage rate for workers in the general community services sector (which includes family support staff) was around 10 per cent lower than mean hourly earnings for all female employees (\$25.00 per hour compared to \$27.60 per hour) (Martin and Healy 2010).
 - At the wider community services level, the sector contributes 4.4 per cent of Australian employment, but 3.2 per cent of wages. After adjusting for the greater likelihood of people working part-time in the community services sector, the wage differential appears to be around 13 per cent (PC 2011b).
 - Comparing graduates employed under modern awards, a new graduate with a 4-year degree in a field relevant to family support (such as social work or psychology) earns \$755.00 per week if employed under the Health Professionals and Support Services Award 2010 or \$760.93 per week under the Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award 2010. A teaching graduate with a 4-year degree employed under the Educational Services (Teachers) Award 2010 earns around five per cent more, or \$796.44 per week.

In order to achieve an adequate supply of workers with appropriate skills, and compensate for stresses associated with their roles, services may need to offer higher wages. Family support roles tend to be more difficult or stressful than many other ECEC, community services and allied health roles, in that they require workers to apply their professional skills in demanding situations. For instance, running a supported playgroup may be harder than running a mainstream playgroup. For nurses, visiting families at risk is likely to be more difficult than conducting child health checks for healthy, well-cared-for children. In light of these differences, family support services may need to pay higher wages than other parts of the ECD and community services sectors in order to attract sufficiently skilled and capable workers.

Parity between government and not-for-profit sectors

There is a considerable difference between the wages of family support staff employed by government and the wages of those employed by NGOs. Several study participants reported considerable difficulty in attracting staff to work for an NGO when they can receive higher salaries working for comparable government services (Early Childhood Intervention Australia (NSW Chapter), sub. 25; Northcott Disability Services, sub. 18; SDN Children's Services, sub. 31; UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families, sub. 62). The Benevolent Society considered that:

... there needs to be parity between the not-for-profit and government sectors. The disparity in pay and conditions between the not-for-profit sector, government and

business is a growing issue, especially as these sectors are increasingly competitive players in the delivery of human services. (sub. 49, p. 15)

SCS data confirm that government workers are more likely to earn higher wages than those doing similar jobs in the non-government sector (Martin and Healy 2010).

Most NGOs are only funded to pay award wages, limiting their ability to pay higher wages to attract staff. Nevertheless, around one quarter of community services organisations in NSW pay above-award wages (Hilferty et al. 2010). However, when this occurs, it can mean that NGOs are cross-subsidising programs (UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families, sub. 62). Their scope to do so over the longer term is likely to be limited.

The wage gaps between NGO and government employees do not take into account fringe benefit tax (FBT) concessions available to some not-for-profit organisations. However, the benefits of FBT concessions are often overestimated, especially for those on low salaries. Therefore, despite having the ability to ‘salary sacrifice’ to obtain FBT concessions, considerable pay gaps remain for many workers. For example, the pay gap for social workers in Western Australia working in equivalent government and NGO positions is between 15 and 27 per cent (table 13.1).

Table 13.1 Annual wage gaps for social workers after salary sacrifice
Western Australia

<i>Public service levels</i>	<i>Public Service 2009 salaries</i>	<i>Equivalent Social and Community Services (SACS) Award levels</i>	<i>SACS Award 2009 salaries</i>	<i>SACS Award salaries with salary sacrificing</i>	<i>Dollar gap (after salary sacrifice)</i>	<i>Percentage gap (after salary sacrifice)</i>
	\$		\$	\$	\$	%
1 st year	51 601	4.2	39 151	43 381	7 700	15.1
2 nd year	54 319	4.3	40 241	45 160	9 159	16.9
3 rd year	57 334	4.4	42 402	47 791	9 543	16.6
4 th year	61 102	5.1	43 393	49 002	12 100	19.8
5 th year	66 943	5.2	44 484	50 332	16 611	24.8
6 th year	70 743	5.3	45 475	51 543	19 205	27.1

Source: WACOSS (2009).

Family support services are not the only services facing pay gaps between government and NGOs. Indeed, the Commission’s report on the not-for-profit sector found that similar issues are prevalent throughout the community services sector (PC 2010a). In that report, the Commission recommended that ‘governments purchasing community services need to base funding on relevant market wages of

equivalent positions' (PC 2010a, p. 271). This consideration remains valid for the family support services workforce, and is supported by The Benevolent Society, which stated that:

[Workers in family support services] require considerable skills and expertise. It is imperative that salaries reflect the training and skills required in order to attract and retain people in the sector. (sub. DR161, p. 2)

RECOMMENDATION 13.1

In order to ensure that family support services can sustain their workforces, and as wages are a major factor in the successful recruitment and retention of staff, government funding for family support programs should:

- ***be based on relevant market wages and conditions for equivalent positions***
- ***take into account the skill sets required to perform the purchased services***
- ***be indexed appropriately to market wage growth within the relevant industry sector.***

The substantial wage gaps between NGO and government positions in the community services sector have begun to be recognised by Australian governments. For example, in May 2009, the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission awarded a pay rise of between 18 and 37 per cent to workers in the social and community service sector, bringing wages into line with those in the government community services sector.

However, this has not entirely removed pay differences in Queensland, because organisations funded by the Australian Government continue to employ staff under modern awards, which can contain considerably lower wages than corresponding state awards. For instance, salaries under the Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award 2010 could be as much as 33 per cent lower than those under the Queensland award by January 2012 (Playgroup Queensland, sub. 9). Such differences would continue to affect the family support workforce. However, in a national wage case for the social and community services (SACS) sector, Fair Work Australia is attempting 'to identify the extent to which gender has inhibited wages growth in the SACS industry and to mould a remedy which addresses that situation' (FWA 2011, p. 84). The possible need for future changes to funding to attract sufficient staff to family support services will depend to a large extent on the final outcome and effects of that case.

Intrinsic motivation

While remuneration is an important factor in determining the supply of workers to family support programs, nonpecuniary factors — such as intrinsic motivation and employment conditions — also impact on supply.

Intrinsic motivation, or the satisfaction a worker gains from an interest or enjoyment in performing their work, is a significant factor in the decision of an individual to choose employment in a family support service. Playgroup Queensland noted that:

Most staff work for the organisation because they are passionate about the grass roots impact that our universal and early intervention services have for families with young children. The staff are dedicated and passionate, and their enthusiasm is evident in their hard work in a sector that has a notorious reputation for low pay. (sub. 9, p. 5)

So while pay and conditions in the family support services workforce appear to be lacking, and may contribute to workforce supply difficulties, this could be partly offset by high levels of intrinsic motivation among workers in the sector — a factor which positively impacts on workforce supply.

Employment conditions

Employment conditions offered by family support services are another factor that affects workforce supply. The attraction and retention of workers is diminished where negative conditions, such as stress and employment uncertainty, are more prevalent. Providers of family support services have a responsibility to offer appropriate employment conditions for their workers (COAG 2009c). However, current funding arrangements mean that many providers, particularly in the non-government sector, face considerable obstacles to offering attractive conditions to their workers.

Workplace conditions

As well as receiving lower rates of pay, employment conditions for family support staff employed by NGOs generally compare unfavourably to conditions in the government sector (UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families, sub. 62). For instance, Playgroup Queensland commented on the inflexible work environments in some family support services (sub. 9). Employment also tends to be less secure in NGOs (see below).

Employment in family support services can also be relatively unattractive because supporting families can be difficult and stressful. For example, children's social workers report that their work entails a range of different relational and

organisational stresses (Gupta and Blewett 2007) and Northcott Disability Services commented on the ‘stress and high workload in some early childhood development services’ (sub. 18, p. 4). Similarly, the emotional toll of working with Indigenous families in remote communities, where ‘staff are inevitably required to deal with traumatic events and traumatised people’ is a major cause of staff dissatisfaction and turnover (Scougall 2008, p. 75).

Duration of employment contracts

Most family support programs receive government funding for a set period of time, typically one to three years. Funding is not guaranteed beyond the end of the funding cycle, and employers generally only employ staff for the duration of the funding agreement. The relatively insecure nature of employment opportunities in family support programs reduces the supply of workers for such programs. A number of study participants expressed concern about this issue (for instance, Benevolent Society, sub. 49; Gowrie SA, sub. 40), with some commenting in great detail.

Lack of job security is a significant issue impacting on staff recruitment and retention. Job security for family support workers is often limited due to the short term nature of many government funding contracts. (UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families, sub. 62, p. 17)

Currently in remote Indigenous communities in the NT a significant number of family support services are provided through NGOs like Save the Children, Red Cross, Smith Family, Fred Hollows Foundation, etc. This means that they are always writing grants, always assessing their financial capacity to provide services, always seeking staff when new funding arrives and losing them when funding decreases and are therefore regularly constrained in the delivery of these vital services by relatively short term funding cycles. (RRACSSU Central, sub. 42, p. 3; Batchelor Institute, sub. 46, p. 3)

In our experience, the often short-term nature of government funding can result in job insecurity and act as a barrier to recruitment and retention of staff ... Funding models should allow service providers to undertake long-term planning and provide the flexibility to tailor services to local needs. (Benevolent Society, sub. DR161, p. 2)

As seen in box 13.1, the success of family support programs depends on relationships between staff and families.

These services are based on relationships, not transactions or clinical interventions. For children and parents, certainty is based on trusting relationships and the experience of attachment. Multiple and compressed interventions provided by different services and workers, even those judged to be of high quality, do not meet children’s need for security based on trusting and continuing relationships. (Green and McClelland 2003, p. 78)

Good relationships are more likely when staff turnover rates are low, because ‘... it takes time to build trust in communities and new or continual change undermines work already done’ (Tasmanian Ministerial Child Care Advisory Council, sub. 83, p. 27). This suggests that measures to reduce staff turnover are likely to increase program effectiveness. For example, in the Best Beginnings program in Western Australia, workforce changes were found to be problematic for service users. When staffing changes occurred, many parents chose to leave the program rather than establish a relationship with a new staff member, despite valuing the support provided by the original staff member (Clark 2009). Similar conclusions have been drawn for Indigenous families in Australia (Flaxman, Muir and Oprea 2009) and from the US experience.

Because the connection between home visitors and families is the route through which change is hypothesised to occur, turnover among home visitors may be a serious problem for programs. (Gomby, Culross and Behrman 1999, p. 18)

In addition, as noted by Dr Dianne Jackson, ‘families that are most vulnerable because of their circumstances are also most likely to be affected by workforce issues’ (sub. 6, p. 2).

Given participants’ concerns about the effect of funding uncertainty and short funding cycles on staff turnover, and the potential for turnover to adversely affect the most disadvantaged children and families, the Commission considers that increasing the certainty and duration of program funding should be explored and implemented wherever possible. Such an approach has been suggested by governments (AHMC and CDSMC 2006), parliamentary committees (for instance, Public Accounts and Estimates Committee 2002), evaluations of family support programs (for example, Muir et al. 2009) and by the Commission in its report on the not-for-profit sector (PC 2010a).

Increasing the certainty and duration of funding for family support programs should not be incompatible with competitive procurement principles nor with the requirement to ensure efficient expenditure of public money. Indeed, the necessity of improving the return on governments’ investment in family support programs would suggest that more funding certainty should be provided to many services.

Principally, funding certainty would involve governments making decisions about funding renewal for family support programs well before program funding is scheduled to end. However in some cases, funding would need to be provided for longer periods than is currently the case. For example, an evaluation of the Australian Government’s Communities for Children initiative found that ‘the four-year Communities for Children model does not allow sufficient time or resources to consult and engage with Indigenous communities, especially in rural

and remote areas' (Flaxman, Muir and Oprea 2009, p. 8). This suggests that long-term, multi-year funding may be required in some circumstances. For example, 5-year funding agreements, in which the mix of services can be altered but the total level of funding is fixed, may be effective in some circumstances (PC 2010a).

RECOMMENDATION 13.2

In order to facilitate better workforce planning by services and the attraction and retention of staff, governments should increase the certainty and duration of funding for family support programs wherever possible.

13.4 Training and workforce planning for family support services

Training and skills

Skills of new graduates

There are few dedicated training pathways for workers in family support programs. Principal among them is the Certificate IV in Child, Youth and Family Intervention (Family Support) (although this certificate is also commonly obtained with specialisations in child protection or residential and out of home care, rather than in family support). However, there are a wide variety of courses in the community services training package that provide some preparation for workers in family support programs. These include certificates and diplomas in community work, children's services, youth work and other related fields.

Professional workers in family support programs gain most of their knowledge about family support practice from their initial university studies in other disciplines. It is therefore of some concern that several study participants considered that newly trained workers in many disciplines may not be equipped to work in family support services (Brotherhood of St Laurence, sub. 32; Gr8 START, sub. 54). In particular, participants expressed doubts about the ability of new graduates to work with families with multiple or complex needs.

To effectively support these families requires high level skills and expertise. Newly-qualified workers do not always have the necessary experience for some of our roles ... (Benevolent Society, sub. 49, p. 18)

Graduates of different courses also differ considerably in their readiness to provide family support services.

... social workers generally graduate with little knowledge of child development, despite the fact that many will be employed in child and family contexts (Early Childhood Intervention Australia (NSW Chapter), sub. 25, p. 5)

... with Northcott's ECD family support services, there is a wide range of qualifications that we would accept as suitable for the role (Social Work, Welfare, Psychology, Social Science, Counselling, etc.), and the structures of these courses can be very different. Some qualifications may require 1000 hours of student field education practical experience, where others have no such requirements. Therefore two staff starting in the same role but with different educational backgrounds, might [have] a different level of skills and readiness to undertake the role effectively and without direct supervision. (Northcott Disability Services, sub. 18, pp. 4–5)

Deficiencies in ECEC-qualified workers' knowledge of child development were also considered to affect their ability to provide supported playgroups, early intervention and family support services (Connect Child and Family Services, sub. 6; Mission Australia, sub. 12) (see chapters 8 and 10).

To the extent that gaps in graduates' knowledge affect the quality of family support services, addressing these gaps may improve service quality. This could be achieved by encouraging students who may later work in family support services to study relevant subjects while at university. In some cases, universities could be more active in facilitating and promoting opportunities for students to take courses in different faculties and departments (for example, by encouraging social work students to study early childhood development subjects, and vice versa).

While encouraging and enabling potential family support workers to obtain a broad knowledge of relevant issues is desirable, requiring them to undertake additional study or work experience placements is unlikely to be equally beneficial. Adding to the burden of study or work experience involves considerable costs borne by the students and thus is likely to reduce, rather than increase, the supply of trained workers for family support programs. In any case, however good the training received, experience may be the only way to build sufficient practical knowledge to deal with complex and multi-faceted family support issues.

Skills of existing workers

While there appear to be some deficiencies in the skills of workers entering the sector, most employers in the general community service sector believe that their existing employees possess the skills necessary for their jobs. Similarly, almost all workers in these services believe that they have the skill required for their current roles (Martin and Healy 2010). This suggests that employers are providing

appropriate in-service training and professional development, or that workers are able to learn from experience in their roles, enabling workers to attain required skill levels after they commence employment. There may nevertheless be gaps in some areas. For instance, the Queen Elizabeth Centre reported that:

Family Support Services lack the appropriate job structure and specialist knowledge of early brain development and how it is impacted by a young child's environment and the damage that can be caused if the early signs are not detected. (sub. DR174, p. 2)

Also, the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland considered that staff in family support programs need cultural competency training in order to work effectively with families from CALD backgrounds (sub. 58). The Family Partnership Training Program is an example of a training program which may address such skill gaps (Queen Elizabeth Centre, sub. DR174).

Professional support

While effective professional development appears to be contributing to the sound skill base of workers in family support programs, there is scope for improvement in the support and guidance provided to this workforce. Professional support is a particular concern in family support services, for several reasons. As discussed above, family support is often provided in difficult environments, and can place considerable relational and emotional burdens on workers. The ability to debrief and converse with peers is therefore essential. However, many workers in family support programs operate in isolation from those in the same profession.

... often, specialist workers are the sole technical expert in their given field in their workplace and they must source professional supervision elsewhere, for which funding may or may not be able to be provided. This drives specialists away from the early childhood development sector. (Mission Australia, sub. 12, p. 4)

The Commission's recommendations relating to the payment of market wages in, and increased funding certainty for, family support programs (recommendations 13.1 and 13.2 above) should help to address these gaps.

- By paying market wages, family support programs should be able to attract more experienced staff, who can more easily take on professional supervision roles.
- With greater funding certainty, family support programs will have greater capacity to establish relationships with other services that employ the same workers, increasing staff access to workers in the same profession. For instance, better linkages between family support and community health services may help to address professional isolation of allied health professionals. The move towards service integration (chapter 15) should also help to improve such linkages.

A clear understanding that providers of family support services are expected to offer professional support and development for their staff (COAG 2009c), and need to be funded to do so, would also help in this regard.

Planning

Workforce mobility

Workforce planning in family support services is complex, because workers come from so many professions. Mission Australia noted that there is:

... a greater potential for mobility into and out of the early childhood development sector for workers in the family support services segment relative to ECEC workers. (sub. 12, p. 8)

This potential mobility arises because most workers in family support programs have skills that are highly relevant in the community services, health, ECEC, disability or aged care sectors, or indeed in many of these sectors. Some governments are actively promoting movement between sectors. For instance, the Queensland Government publishes guidance for children's services workers who are interested in working in family support services (Queensland Government nd).

Despite their capacity to work in other sectors, 68 per cent of general community services staff reported that they intend to be working in the same sector in three years time (Martin and Healy 2010). Indeed, 'general community service workers who contemplate leaving their jobs are often motivated by opportunities to advance within the sector, rather than by more attractive outside offers' (Martin and Healy 2010, p. 190). This suggests that creating or expanding opportunities for career progression within family support services will promote staff retention. The Commission's recommendation to increase funding certainty for family support services (recommendation 13.2 above) should assist them in creating career opportunities for their staff.

Rural and remote issues

In common with other parts of the ECD workforce, providers of family support services reported difficulty in attracting staff in rural areas (Benevolent Society, sub. 49; Early Childhood Intervention Australia (NSW Chapter), sub. 25; Northcott Disability Services, sub. 18). In addition, deficiencies in training were reported to be particularly acute in rural and remote areas.

There is a severe lack of training across the sector — i.e. skills in working effectively with other organisations, managing services, supporting and mentoring staff within

services, working effectively with parents and families, meeting the complex needs of children with additional needs in resource poor work environments, financial management, and other leadership activities. (RRACSSU Central, sub. 42, p. 18; Batchelor Institute, sub. 46, p. 18)

Chapter 9 considers rural and remote issues for the ECEC workforce, and chapter 10 examines training and professional development of the workforce. Many of the recommendations in those chapters will also be relevant to workers in family support services. For instance, workers in family support services in remote areas require suitable housing and access to relevant technology to assist with training, development and support.

Indigenous programs

Many family support programs place a particular emphasis on supporting Indigenous parents and children. For instance, the Australian Government's Communities for Children initiative contains programs for specific target groups, including Indigenous Australians and families from CALD backgrounds (Muir et al. 2009). There are also a number of Indigenous-specific family support programs. For example, in the Northern Territory:

The Families as First Teachers-Indigenous Parenting Support Services Program works to strengthen positive relationships in families, promote positive behaviour in children and build confidence in parenting. This is done through modelling behaviour management at the early learning sessions, encouraging families in their interactions, group discussions, parenting workshops, home visiting and individual consultations. The program takes a strength based approach to parenting, working from the belief that all families want the best start in life for their children. (DET NT 2011b)

Whether they work in mainstream or targeted programs, staff need skills in the provision of culturally appropriate services to effectively support Indigenous families.

Culturally appropriate services are those which have individual staff who have appropriate knowledge, skills, values and a long-term commitment to building trusting relationships and engaging with families. (Flaxman, Muir and Oprea 2009, p. viii)

The Commission's recommendation to increase funding certainty for family support services (recommendation 13.2 above) should facilitate long-term staff commitment to Indigenous-focused services. Other methods of improving the quality of ECD service provision for Indigenous families, including cultural competency training, are discussed in chapter 14.

Need for robust evaluation

While the need for more consistent and robust evaluation of family support programs has been recognised by Australian governments (AHMC and CDSMC 2006), there is little high-quality evidence about which programs are most effective and whether different workers have the necessary skills to support vulnerable families and improve child outcomes (box 13.2). Indeed, the evidence base on the effectiveness of family support programs is in ‘urgent’ need of improvement (Barlow and Parsons 2007, p. 10). The weakness of the evidence base for family support programs means that, in all probability, some family support programs are ineffective, and funding directed to such programs would be more effectively spent elsewhere. The Benevolent Society highlighted the importance of program evaluation, offering that:

Evaluation is critical to measuring what we do and the impact of our programs on the people we work with. This allows us to identify what’s working well and any gaps in service delivery so that we can continually improve what we do and ensure that we are providing the best possible service to our clients. (sub. DR161, p. 3)

Evaluating family support programs can be challenging, because many of their impacts are in areas that defy neat categorisation, such as relationships and personal growth. There are nevertheless a number of promising methods and techniques that could enhance family support evaluations (Bruner 2006). Longitudinal studies can also be important in evaluating family support programs. ‘Longitudinal data are essential to analyse change’ (Sanson et al. 2002, p. 4), as they allow the sustainability and effectiveness of different programs to be assessed.

RECOMMENDATION 13.3

In order to obtain the greatest benefit from workers in the family support sector, governments should direct a larger share of funding for family support programs towards obtaining high-quality evidence about the effectiveness of different programs through longitudinal studies and robust program evaluations.

Provision of family support by volunteers and peers

Family support programs provided by volunteers and peers have demonstrated various degrees of success. While there is little evidence that programs which focus on befriending parents lead to improved child development outcomes (Byrne and Kemp 2009), other volunteer and peer programs do lead to such improvement. For instance, HIPPY has been shown to enhance children’s development and school readiness in a variety of communities (Dean and Leung 2010). The expansion of

HIPPY is now being funded by the Australian Government (DEEWR nde). A federally funded evaluation of the program has been completed (including an examination of the program's effects in five Indigenous communities — Indigenous-focused services are discussed further in chapter 14), although the results have not yet been released (Brotherhood of St Laurence, sub. DR182). The involvement of volunteers in family support programs was supported by several study participants (for instance, Benevolent Society, sub. 49; Community Connections Solutions Australia, sub. 75).

Programs delivered by volunteers and peers have a number of potential benefits including that:

- members of the same community can be particularly effective at building relationships with target families
- they may be perceived as less threatening than traditional services, particularly where vulnerable families may be wary of government representatives and authority figures
- they can have lower costs, and so can reach more families with a given budget.

However, in expanding volunteer- and peer-delivered family support programs, there are a number of hurdles that would need to be overcome. First, the Australian evidence base for these programs remains sparse. It would need to be improved before volunteer family support programs could confidently be adopted on a widespread basis. Second, recruitment of appropriate volunteers may be challenging, particularly as volunteering in community services organisations has seen a relative decline in participation in recent years (ABS 2007c). Despite these challenges, the Commission considers that delivery of family support programs by volunteers and peers merits further development and evaluation.

RECOMMENDATION 13.4

In order to obtain better evidence on the effectiveness of family support programs delivered by volunteers and peers, governments should evaluate such programs on a wider scale, with a view to the expansion of such programs if they prove to be effective.