

Barnardos Australia response to the Report on Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

To: Productivity Commission

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Barnardos Australia wishes to respond to the Report on the importance of childcare for highly disadvantaged children, not only children whose parents are working. We believe that failure to ensure children's access to childcare, based on the criteria of children's needs, will mean that costs are shifted to other government programs for child protection and that there will be a loss of substantial workforce capacity in the future.

The focus of our concerns are for children that are known to be at risk ie. suffer abuse and neglect, and for those children living in kin care, not necessarily with Grandparents. This is not a small number of children, 22.2 per 1,000 children aged under 1 and 1-4 years have substantiated allegations of neglect or abuse (AIHW Children Protection 2011-12 Table 2.3). Many of these children remain with their parents in poor care settings and 9,160 are in out of home care (on any one night, counted on 30th June, 2012). Half of these children are with their kin who also need childcare support.

Childcare for this group of vulnerable children is essential for:

- countering the impact of neglect
- keeping children safe as other adults have care of the child during the day
- allowing kin carers to care for children. Due to the importance of family to children and the decrease in people willing to foster children, many related people are taking on the care of children under the age of 5 (not just grandparents) and these people need childcare.

We wish to support Recommendation 12.7

We support this draft recommendation to ensure that children in special need get access to 13 weeks of childcare, to a limit of 18% capacity at a centre (previously the Special Childcare Benefit). However, we note that currently these provisions are not widely used and we would like to see Centres audited to show that they implement these provisions. We do not agree with **Draft Finding 1** which claims that the Special Childcare Benefit program is not well targeted, as Barnardos Australia utilises these provisions regularly and find it essential for many children. We agree with the recommendation that the **Grandparent Childcare Benefit (GCCB)** continues.

We disagree with Draft Recommendation 5.3. Barnardos Australia wishes to express support for ongoing funding of the **HIPPY** program as linked with the ECEC sector. We believe that **HIPPY** is one of a number of programs which greatly adds to early childhood education and there should be an increase in such innovative programs to increase early learning to children even before the children are targeted by **HIPPY**. We would add that Barnardos Australia itself is having to fund research into early learning programs of babies to 3 year olds as we believe that this is the only way to move children effectively into early learning and subsequently school based learning.

Overall, we wish **to see longer term access to childcare based on children's needs**, rather than workforce participation and therefore question the direction of the Productivity Commission Report. Barnardos Australia strongly disagree with the view, expressed in pages 198-205 of the Report, that there is inadequate 'evidence' about the importance of early childhood education which means highly disadvantaged children cannot be routinely included in childcare. We agree that there is little local evidence but believe that this is because of failure to fund research over many years (much of the research quoted in the Report is from overseas). However, this lack of local evidence does not mean that these children should be abandoned. It is Barnardos Australia's view, based on practice over the past 30 years, that childcare is an important way of addressing the needs of children who suffer neglect and physical abuse in order for them to become productive members of the community. If such services are not provided there will be a transfer of costs to other Government Departments particularly those involved with child protection.

Barnardos Australia's position is summarised in our position paper on childcare:

Good childcare is "a major tool in early intervention". It is:

The therapeutic gifts that a good child care program offers [are]:

Nurturing, support, security and predictability. It can let children know that they can count on being loved and cared for in a child care setting. Predictability, focus encouragement and expansion facilitate a young child's intellectual development.iii

Children in child care services benefit from stable interpersonal attachments, and grow psychologically and socially. Neuroscientists have come to understand the importance of brain development in the first years of life. A positive, nurturing environment optimises the development of neural pathways, and critical periods of learning and development can be optimised. Children in "at risk" situations are highly likely not to have developed the same range of social and educational skills as their peers; for example, many children entering out of home care have severe educational disadvantages. South Australian studies show that school aged children entering care are typically performing four years behind their age groups in both numeracy and literacy. Quality children's services can provide broad learning environments.

Further, a quality child care service can provide some of the components of treatment approaches designed to assist young children who have suffered abuse and neglect. In addition to ameliorating the effects of a poor home life, child care can provide long periods of safety to a child. Child protection workers often have little time to learn what is going on inside a family, and cannot easily monitor deterioration in family circumstances. It is very difficult to predict which children may come to be abused and the point at which "good enough" parenting may become neglect. Childcare services can assist in the monitoring of child safety and the impact on children of changes in family circumstances.

Child care services can provide families with important community support. Although this may not happen, when it does, families can be strengthened by factors such as reduced isolation, the modelling of good child-rearing practices, and the provision of general information about raising children. Parents of "at risk" children can greatly benefit from access to childcare services. Adult stress is associated with physical violence against children. Yandell and Hewitt point to the importance of childcare services in relieving parental stress. Rodetti argues that, for families at a variety of "functioning levels", day care is very important. For example, parents requiring extra supports are free to attend counselling or training while their children are attending day care. Some parents who have marginal support systems, and are socially isolated, may also be psychologically vulnerable. They may make unwise life choices that are risky for their children. For families needing specialised assistance, Rodetti suggests, trust can be

developed with children's services, which may help a family through crises—for example, teenage parents may be able to continue their education. Further, social work assistance can be linked to the family. When parents do not have a network of social supports, they will often lack the resilience to cope with daily stresses and will be more susceptible to major and minor crises.

For families in crisis, children's services can be used to stabilise the family. Childcare is often the safest place for young children who have entered the child welfare system and are still living with their parents. A strong, respectful partnership between child welfare workers and day care staff can strengthen case planning, facilitate family maintenance and sensitise decision making. Rodetti concludes that:

As child welfare services are reframed to emphasise family support, strengths and resilience, an enhanced role for child day care services is re-emerging. vi

Through the use of a range of children's services, vulnerable children can be provided with:

- a protected environment during the day
- stimulation and developmental opportunities to counteract early neglect
- vigilant adults who come to know the child and are able to detect changes in the child's functioning and wellbeing, and who can monitor the impact on the child of changes in the child's family circumstances. vii

Parents of these vulnerable children can be provided with:

- regular periods of relief and breaks from the pressures of child rearing
- access to information about child development from behaviour experts who can offer parents assistance in child management
- a non-stigmatising service likely to be taken up by parents, to help them cope with difficulties they may have in parenting full time
- for child welfare workers, the provision of child care to vulnerable children is:
 - a practical solution for workers who may be reluctant to take children into care without evidence of serious abuse
 - an early intervention strategy to reduce the impact of disadvantaged home circumstances on a child's development.

In its study for the NSW Department of Community Services, the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW states:

The effectiveness of the use of children's services as a protective and preventative strategy for children is widely supported in the literature reviewed. The research indicates that access to children's services as part of a holistic approach to family support, minimises the risk of abuse and neglect. viii

References

- iii Lally, R, "Child care as early intervention", *JiGSAW*, Issue 30, Spring 2003.
- iv Bromer, J and Henly, JR, "Child care as family support: caregiver practices across child care providers", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2004, pp. 2–12.
- v Yandell, Margaret and Hewitt, Lesley, "Relief Day Care: A role in Preventing Child Abuse. The Case Emerging from the Literature", *Children Australia*, vol. 20 no. 3, 1995, pp. 5–10.
- vi Rodetti, Martha G, "Child Day Care: A Key Building Block of Family Support and Family Preservation Programs", *Child Welfare*, vol. LXXIV, November–December 1995.