

Submission from Berry Street [Victoria] to the Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Productivity Commission.

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About Berry Street's work in the Early Years.

Berry Street is Victoria's largest independent Child and Family Welfare organisation with a long history of working with the State's most vulnerable children, families and communities.

Our work with vulnerable children and families informs the development of all our services and most recently has informed the development of targeted Play and Learn Groups within our **Early Learning Is Fun [ELF] Program**. ELF Play and Learn groups are facilitated Playgroups that work with vulnerable communities in Gippsland and with former refugee communities across metropolitan Melbourne.

Over the past three years Berry Street has, with the assistance of a philanthropic Trust, developed a highly successful model of engaging and working with families from diverse and complex backgrounds that facilitates early learning opportunities and that links families and their children to local universal services, including Maternal and Child Health Services, Kindergarten [Pre-school] and Primary School. The ELF Groups have been evaluated by the **Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital**. The evaluation [August 2014] demonstrates how the program has achieved its desired outcomes with children and families effectively and sustainably linked into the universal service system and making learning and developmental gains on a par with their peers from non-vulnerable backgrounds.

Background to the development of ELF Play and Learn Groups.

Berry Street's work with vulnerable children and with populations on the edge of care has given the organisation a sound understanding of the fragilities within communities and within families that inhibit their use of service systems that are ostensibly designed to serve them. The organisation believes that it is not the family or child that is hard to reach but that services and service systems often are. That is why we have worked hard with families and communities to understand how to offer services that engage and welcome families and that bring long term benefits and opportunities to children and families.

Berry Street is fully aware and has been for many decades, of the importance of engaging and working with families early and of intervening early to break the cycle of deprivation and vulnerability. We understand the importance of the first three years, and most critically, of the first 12 months of a child's life to build a sustaining foundation for future development and life-long learning and opportunity. Our work is informed by **Bruce Perry M.D., Ph.D** and the increasing body of knowledge currently developing around **Infant Mental Health**.

Berry Street is committed to breaking the perpetual cycle of inequality of access to opportunity and life-long learning that beset some Australian communities including Aboriginal communities, CALD and former refugee communities and communities with repeating generations of high socio-economic disadvantage. We believe that to continue to marginalise some communities and to accept the cycles of deprivation is not only a breach of children's rights but is also unsound economic policy where many thousands of children are failing to reach their potential as contributing adults in Australian community life. Recent research conducted by Price Waterhouse Cooper [September 2014] suggests that investing in the Early Years produces significant economic benefits to the community.

In response to the Productivity Commissions' Report Berry Street makes the following submission:

1. Berry Street supports a system for Early Childhood Education and Care that limits and curtails profit making in the sector, supports a transparent and simplified single subsidy system and that prioritises the rights and needs of all children to quality Early Childhood Education and Care with particular emphasis on supporting vulnerable children's access to services.
2. Government at all levels, needs to demonstrate an understanding and recognition of the value to the Australian community of quality Early Childhood Education and Care by supporting Government investment in universal services for all children aged from birth to five years - as the Government currently invests in Primary School Education.
3. The investment and development of Early Childhood Education and Care services by Government must prioritise the rights of children from vulnerable families and communities to access universal services, prioritising engagement strategies in services for children aged from birth to 5 years including facilitated Playgroups.
4. Knowing what we do about the impact of stress on vulnerable families and their children, ECEC and other support services for children from vulnerable and low income families need to be free.
5. Berry Street is strongly opposed to the proposed requirement for a carer "activity test" of 24 hours of work, study or training to release up to 100 hours of support. This requirement effectively disenfranchises children from vulnerable families. Children must be regarded as having a right to quality education and care independent of adverse family circumstances.
6. Federal, State and Local Government should work together to develop a comprehensive approach to the policy, planning and delivery of Early Childhood Education and Care Services that identifies communities of vulnerability and where effective bridges between universal pre-school [0-5] and primary school services can be constructed in all communities.

7. There should be no curtailment on the planned implementation of the National Quality Standards Framework [NQSF].
8. Knowing what we do about the importance of quality education and care provision in the first three years of life, there should be no erosion of the National Quality Standards Framework with respect to qualified professionals supporting the learning and development of children from birth to 5 years.
9. Greater support and scrutiny should be afforded to Family Day Care as a flexible and affordable Early Childhood Education and Care option [including respite care] for all families, applying the NQSF through formal associations to accredited and local Government supported Early Childhood Education and Care centres.