

## **SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN CHILDCARE**

The following comments on the Productivity Commission Draft Report of Childcare and Early Childhood Learning (July 2014) are in relation to its effect on children with disabilities in childcare, their families and the childcare educators who support them.

### **Background:**

The STaR Childcare Support Program has been providing early intervention support for young children 0-6 with disabilities, their families and the childcare staff who support them for over 10 years. STaR currently supports 12 affiliated childcare centres, enrolling approximately 50 children with diagnosed disabilities (many of whom have significant and multiple disabilities), and 280 childcare staff annually. Highly qualified early intervention educators provide training and ongoing support and mentoring for childcare staff in participating centres to assist them to include and support the children's development within the daily routines and activities of the childcare day. The STaR 'Child Support Model' and SchoolSTaRT Program implemented within the centres ensures that childcare staff are up-skilled to effectively include and promote the child's development, involve families in the planning process and support the child, family and school through the transition to school process. The model supports childcare staff collaboration with other early intervention professionals e.g. therapists, and guides childcare staff in including functional therapy objectives in the child's Individual Education Plan and implementing these plans within the child's daily childcare routine.

The model originated from a research-based program at Macquarie University and has been funded to support children with disabilities in childcare within the community for the past 12 years by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA - now Department of Social Services) with a contribution from the Intervention Support Program administered by the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC). An ongoing partnership with Macquarie University ensures that all programs are research-based and uphold the principles of best practice in early intervention.

The following comments on the Commission's Report are based on STaR's knowledge of early intervention for young children with disabilities and its work in childcare environments over the past 12 years (including council owned, private and community based centres).

### **Comments:**

#### **Assistance for children with additional needs**

The proposed indicative annual expenditure on ECEC (Table 2 p17) appears to indicate a decrease in funding for additional needs from 0.6 billion for 2013-2014 to 0.5 billion per year from 2014-2018. This indicates not only a dramatic fall in revenue but no increase for the next 4 years. This is a major concern considering:

- the growth in numbers of children with disabilities accessing funding over the next 4 years
- the need to cover the 'gap' in funding additional support
- the identified need for training and support for childcare educators
- the need to employ more highly qualified educators or staff to support children with disabilities
- the identified need to support children transitioning into and beyond their first year at school

To assist children with additional needs, the Commission has proposed (p23)

1. *a Special ECLS (or SECLS) which will ideally meet the full deemed cost of their additional care, in order to promote equality of ECEC access for these children or, if funding is constrained, a way of prioritising its allocation amongst additional needs groups.*

**Recommendation for prioritizing funding if necessary:**

- Funding be based on child's needs rather than on a set amount of funding regardless of need e.g. level of disability and support needs
  - Consider a cluster support model (where possible) whereby up to 5 children with diagnosed disabilities are included in an affiliated community based supported ECEC service. Service isolation is reduced thus increasing cost-effectiveness. These centres would become centres of excellence in child development and support.
2. *an Inclusion Support Program to provide once- off grants to ECEC providers to build the capacity to provide services to additional needs children including training for staff.*

**Comments:**

The provision of "once-off grants" to ECEC providers to build capacity would need to be carefully monitored to ensure evidence-based intervention strategies were being taught and best-practice training procedures were being implemented. A review by Kretlow and Bartholomew (2010) showed that group professional development alone was not enough for teachers of children with disabilities to learn deeply, apply new skills and avoid practising errors. Critical additional components were follow-up observation as teachers encounter challenges with real children in real settings, specific feedback, and modeling attuned to teachers' strengths.

Experience working in childcare has indicated the need for on-going support of childcare staff particularly in the area of training. The transient nature of childcare workers means trained staff frequently move, often leaving children with disabilities even more vulnerable and unsupported. Once-off grants, if already used, would compound this issue.

The availability of Specialist Equipment is crucial particularly for the inclusion

of children with significant physical disabilities and should be supported.

### **INFORMATION REQUEST 8.1**

*The Commission seeks further information on the nature of the barriers faced by families with children with additional needs in accessing appropriate ECEC services and the prevalence of children with additional needs who have difficulty accessing and participating fully in ECEC. Information on the additional costs of including children with additional needs is also sought.*

As indicated in the current Productivity Report, many of the concerns raised in the 2011 Early Childhood Development Workforce study have not been addressed and are still a major barrier for equal access to ECEC services for children with disabilities (p353). Whilst there appears to no longer be overt discrimination against including children because of their 'disability' there is definitely reluctance to enroll children due to:

- uncertainty or lack of experience about how to include children with disabilities and how to cater for their developmental needs
- lack of staff support and training
- onerous paperwork involved in applying for and maintaining ISS and Professional Support Subsidies
- limited hours of funding support
- amount of time for ISS to be allocated
- additional associated costs
- additional time constraints for planning, meetings etc.
- response time for specialist equipment

The IPSP has attempted to address some of these issues and whilst it has supported centre staff to consider strategies for the general inclusion of children with additional needs, it has failed to address the need for childcare staff to support the developmental learning needs of children with disabilities, particularly those children with moderate to severe and multiple disabilities. One of the major undertakings of the Commission is to report on and make recommendations about "optimizing children's learning and development". Promoting access to childcare and promoting inclusive practices is not enough. Once in care, the individual developmental learning needs of children with disabilities must also be addressed and childcare educators need support to do this. This support is not being provided. Staff training in working with children with disabilities is negligible and on-site support is seldom and fragmented.

Australian peak bodies (ECA & ECIA, 2012) and the report of the Productivity Commission into the Early Childhood Development Workforce (2011) have recognised that access to childcare is not enough; they have identified the urgent need for an increase in skills among early childhood staff in working effectively with young children with disabilities. STaR currently has 35 families waiting for placement in STaR supported childcare centres in the Ryde to Blacktown area, either because they can not find an accepting childcare

placement or because they have removed their child from a centre unable to cater for their child's additional needs.

### **INFORMATION REQUEST 12.7**

*The Commission seeks views on the best way to allocate a fixed funding pool to support the ECEC access of children with additional needs and deliver the greatest community benefit. This includes views on the best option for allocating the Special Early Care and Learning Subsidy payments for children with disabilities to ensure that the program enables as many children with disabilities as possible to access mainstream ECEC services.*

Funding should consider

1. Allocation of funding based on child's level of need e.g. support required for child's inclusion and developmental learning needs
2. Funding support for ECEC services enrolling children with a diagnosed disability should be immediate on enrolment
3. Funding applications need to be as simple and efficient as possible (unlike the current ISA system)
4. Funding should allow 100% of the deemed cost of additional ECEC services to ensure those services including children with disabilities are not financially disadvantaged
5. ECEC services need to be accountable for funding and be supported to provide an individual inclusion and education plan for each child funded.

### **INFORMATION REQUEST 12.8**

*The Commission seeks views on what types of services (that are not the funding responsibility of the National Disability Insurance Scheme) should be provided for children with a diagnosed disability attending ECEC, and how best to prioritise available funding. It also seeks information on the range of needs and the costs of meeting these needs for children of different ages and by the nature and extent of their disability*

Children and ECEC staff should be supported by an early intervention special educator who will train and support childcare educators to

1. effectively include the child
2. co-ordinate input from therapy and medical services into a practical individual education plan that can be implemented within the daily routines and activities of the ECEC service
3. learn research-based strategies of best-practice in early intervention
4. support the child's family
5. transition the child (and family) smoothly to school

This educator would support several ECEC services and children.

The STaR model was developed to address these needs. It assists families to find supported childcare placement and builds childcare staff capacity to include and to cater for the child's developmental needs. The basis of STaR's support for ECEC services is to build on the strengths and goodwill of the staff and provide both formal training tailored to their needs and 'on the job' coaching in assessment, child intervention and collaboration with families and other professionals. This model aligns with best practice (Klingner, 2004) and was recommended in the Productivity Commission report (2011) as a possible solution to the issue of staff training and support (p.179).

The STaR model is an excellent basis for inclusion support. Evidence for this are its listing as a Promising Practice Profile by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (Soriano, Clark, & Wise, 2008), an independent and positive evaluation by Dr Mark Carter (2008) and citations as an effective model of early childhood intervention in national and international journals (e.g., Kemp, Kishida, Carter & Sweller, 2013).

### **INFORMATION REQUEST 13.2**

*The Commission seeks information on the efficiency and effectiveness of outsourcing the allocation of funding under capped programs that support children with additional needs. Views are sought on the model that should be used to allocate funding under the proposed new funding arrangements and the governance requirements to ensure outsourced allocation services are accountable, and deliver value for money.*

The outsourcing of funding to individual Early Intervention services can have a devastating effect on collaboration between services and therefore support for families and the child. Government support for children with disabilities in ECEC services should focus on evidence based support for ECEC staff with collaborative input from community therapists etc. as needed.

A support model for children with disabilities in ECEC services should embrace:

1. research/evidence-based programs
2. programs which embrace inclusion but also look at the child's individual strengths and needs and support for the child's learning and development within the inclusive environment
3. level of funding based on child's needs (e.g. high support needs vs language delay)
4. funding to support children 'at risk' of delay
5. collaboration with all services supporting the child
6. co-ordination of services and ECEC support through a special educator
7. data-based accountability

The STaR Inclusive Early Childhood Program has been successfully implementing a Child Support Model for children with diagnosed disabilities in childcare services for 10 years. This model supports families, particularly

those of children with significant disabilities, to enroll their child in an inclusive and supportive childcare service. It provides on-going early intervention special educator support and training and mentoring for ECEC staff to effectively include and cater for the child's additional learning needs. STaR is currently developing a TAFE Level IV training course in working with young children with disabilities. STaR's Childcare Support Program has the capacity for nation-wide adoption once TAFE training is in place.

## References:

Carter, M. (2008). *Final evaluation report: Special Teaching and Research (STaR) Project. Report to the Early Childhood – Invest to Grow Program, FaCSIA Stronger Families and Communities Strategy*. Sydney: Speech Pathology Centre - Private.

Kemp, C., Kishida, Y., Carter, M., & Sweller, N. (2013). The effect of activity type on the engagement and interaction of young children with disabilities in inclusive childcare. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 28*, 124-143

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Kretlow, A. G., & Bartholomew, C. C. (2010). Using coaching to improve the fidelity of evidence-based practices: A review of studies. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 33*(4), 279-299

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Soriano, G., Clark, H., & Wise, S. (2008). *Promising Practices Profiles: A final report prepared for the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs as part of the National Evaluation Consortium (Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW and the Australian Institute of Family Studies)*. Sydney: Australian Government.