

The Case for National Investment in Early Childhood

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Four years ago, the Prime Minister appointed Larry Anthony Australia's first ever Minister for Children. Under his leadership, a great deal of work was done in consultation with the states and territories to develop the framework for a National Agenda for Early Childhood (NAEC). But now, 12 months after the Minister lost his seat, there is no longer a specially designated Minister for Children and hence no one to champion the cause. Although the Communities for Children initiative of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy has a strong focus on supporting families with young children in around 43 struggling communities, the Early Childhood Agenda is no longer listed on the home page of the Department's website and the NAEC page hasn't been updated in three months. This, along with the Treasury's failure to include any reference to the importance of early childhood investment or care in its Intergenerational Report in 2002, is of great concern - this is despite the Australian government's substantial investment in supporting child care!

A very different ranking of priorities seemingly exists in Canada where child care was amongst the top three priorities of the incoming Martin government last year. In Britain, despite some recent overstated concerns about the failure of its flagship program Sure Start to show any substantial benefits after three short years of roll-out, there is still a substantial commitment to investment in young children flowing from the 'Every Child Matters' White Paper. The changes include the establishment of Children's Centres in every community, a right to 15 hours of free preschool education for all three and four year olds, the creation of Children's Trusts and Directors of Children's services in every local authority to ensure better coordination of services by government and non-government agencies. In New Zealand, long recognised internationally as amongst the leaders in early childhood education and care, the importance of the salaries and conditions of those working with young children has been recognised by the commencement of a process that will see the whole workforce having three year qualifications as a minimum standard, and parity in pay and conditions with primary school teachers.

By their action, these governments are clearly acknowledging what developmental science is telling us. James Heckman, Chicago-based 2000 Nobel laureate in Economics - who will be speaking at a national conference in Australia in February 2006, organised by the advocacy group NIFTeY Australia (National Investment for the Early Years), acknowledges the large body of scientific evidence that shows a 'persistent pattern of strong effects' derived from early intervention. He notes:

Significantly these substantial long-term benefits are not necessarily limited to intellectual gains, but are most clearly seen by measures of 'social performance' and 'lifetime achievement'. The

development of social, motivational and other emotional skills affects performance in school and the workplace. People who participate in enriched early childhood programs are more likely to complete school and much less likely to require welfare benefits, become teen parents, or participate in criminal activities.

Heckman concludes that 'Investments in social policies that intervene in the development of human capital in the early years have very high rates of returns for two reasons: (a) skill begets skill and (b) younger persons have a longer horizon over which to recoup the fruits of their investments'.

Why doesn't Australia get it? Or more accurately, why does it start to understand and then lose courage as change gets bogged down in the morass of overlapping federal and state responsibilities?

We now know that sustained home visiting by US child health nurses to first time, single disadvantaged teenage mothers results in savings over 15 years of \$5 for every \$1 invested through better outcomes in mother's and children's health and wellbeing. Yet only one state - South Australia - is investing in this form of intervention at a level that is likely to make a difference.

We also know from the small US Perry Preschool Program that \$17 can be returned (from savings in welfare, crime reduction and new tax revenue) over 40 years from every dollar invested in enriched preschool for three and four year olds, supplemented by weekly home visits to the parents. Yet despite this, free preschool is inaccessible for many disadvantaged children in some Australian states.

Is it because many of us have a limited understanding of the needs and capabilities of the young pre-verbal child? Clyde Hertzman, prominent Canadian researcher and co-editor of 'Developmental Health and the Wealth of Nations', believes many parents both underestimate young children's capacity to learn from their environment and overestimate their level of responsible action. He says, we deny the adverse emotional impact of domestic violence or overcrowded and unresponsive child care environments or the barrage of unrelenting sounds and images from TV on young children because they can't speak, while at the same time interpreting their crying as deliberate attempts to manipulate their carers, or their messy exploration in play as an attention seeking device. It's as if John Bowlby - who with his groundbreaking studies of the attachment relationship between children and their primary carers was one of the twentieth century's most influential contributors to developmental psychology - had never lived.

Sue Gerhardt, in her book 'Why love matters - how affection shapes a baby's brain' reminds us that 'the human baby is the most socially influenced creature on earth, open to learning what his (sic) own emotions are and how to manage them. Our earliest experiences as babies have more relevance to our adult selves than many of us realise.' US research tracking the impact of adverse childhood experiences like abuse, parental mental illness or drug misuse, domestic violence or adult criminality confirms

Gerhardt's views with increased risks in adulthood of promiscuity, early parenthood, substance misuse, depression and poor work performance accumulating in proportion to the risks experienced in early childhood.

But it's not just for emotional and cognitive development that the early years are important. Physical health in later life is profoundly affected by experiences in the early years - even before birth. British epidemiologist David Barker has now compiled evidence from many countries showing that risks for many adult physical disorders - such as hypertension, coronary artery disease, some kinds of renal disease and 'adult-onset' diabetes - can be traced to a pattern of lower than average birth-weight followed by above average weight gain during later childhood. This is just the sort of pattern observed in many Indigenous Australians.

Have young children become the hostage to our busy, overfilled lives? Anne Manne in her recent book 'Motherhood' asks if we really can have all that the social revolution in gender roles promised in the latter years of the last millennium. And her concerns are supported by emerging research from both the US and the UK about the adverse impacts on children's emotional development of long hours (more than 35 hours a week) of centre-based child care - regardless of quality - on infants. It's not just that these children are more assertive, but they are also at increased risk of being more aggressive and disruptive when they get into formal education. Little wonder that the importance of parents having a choice to care for their young infants through extended paid parental leave provisions (the Scandinavian model) as an alternative to centre-based care is now being explored in the UK, where paid maternity leave provisions outstrip what is available currently in Australia. What will the brave new Industrial Relations world do to support parents being able to provide or access good quality care - whether by themselves or paid carers?

As Pulitzer Prize nominee Ann Crittenden has said, 'human capital accounts for three quarters of the producible forms of wealth in wealthy countries... Mothers and early childhood educators and carers are the most important contributors' to its development. This is the essential infrastructure that will contribute to Australia's future economic wellbeing. Frittering away the economic successes of the past decade on unnecessary tax cuts when there is so much more we could be doing - in promoting health, early childhood education and care, family and community support - to build a solid foundation to promote human development across the lifespan is not the way to achieve it.

About the author

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