

CONSIDERING THE FUTURE OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SECTOR

The start of the year has seen a flurry of media comment about early childhood education and care. In addition to the Productivity Commission Inquiry, there are two senate inquiries about early childhood education.

As we all know, the introduction of the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) with its aim to build more consistently high-quality early childhood services that could give every child the opportunity for the best start in life, marked some profound changes for many services.

But no matter how high and consistent the quality of early childhood services, if parents can't access them and/or afford them there is a big problem, not just for individual families and children, but for the community.

Over 400 submissions to the Productivity Commission are available on its website with a wealth of comments, ideas, and suggestions. A browse through the submissions shows that organisations and individuals have a range of ideas around future options for early childhood education and care and early childhood learning. Many have good ideas about developing approaches that both support parents' workforce participation and address children's learning and development needs.

The thrust of many media comments was on more flexible, affordable childcare options for families, given the changing pace and patterns of families' work lives. Scanning through the submissions reveals a similar focus—on accessibility, flexibility, quality and affordability. The Productivity Commission will consider all these responses, along with its own expert research. It reports to government in early July, 2014. There will be some public hearings as well. The Commission makes its final report to government on 31 October, 2014. To get a sense of the submissions' content you can go to: www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/childcare.

Given our changing communities it is certainly time to have a close look at how we provide early childhood services that both promote children's early development and learning and cater for families' work commitments. The research is clear—a good early start provides strong foundations for transition to school. It is very difficult to close the achievement 'gaps' that present at the start of school without quality preschool early childhood education programs. If parents can't work because they can't access and/or afford suitable child care—and/or if they are at breaking point trying to juggle the demands of child care and work, then we need to rethink options.

Nannies and au pairs are in huge demand. And in this largely unregulated home-based care area, there is certainly need for careful scrutiny—both for the protection of children and families and care providers, and in terms of subsidies and rebates for families

and the broader taxation system. Common sense though must prevail. Regulating casual babysitters and babysitting arrangements and other semi-formal care arrangements is likely to cause hassles for families.

Please take the opportunities of the Productivity Commission and the Senate inquiries to 'have your say'. Have a look at ECA's submission to the Productivity Commission. ECA provides informed, carefully considered and supported views about a way forward—and about what works well.

As the year marches on, this first issue of *Every Child* starts with a range of articles to support your thinking and practice now and into the future. For example, ideas around becoming 'culturally competent' are always interesting. Cultural diversity is a reality in many (maybe most?) early childhood services, in one way or another—so each one of us needs to think about what cultural competence means, in theory and in practice in our work contexts. Other highlights in this issue are Minister Sussan Ley's guest statement, Jackie Brien's piece on NQF and early childhood intervention services issues, Sue Elliott's comments on 'sustainability', and ideas about technology and young children. Finally, with the warm weather continuing well into the year, it's always good to be reminded of how to support families to deal with the problem of head lice.

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