



EARLY CHILDHOOD

NATIONAL REFORM SYMPOSIUM

27 NOVEMBER 2015 | ADELAIDE

SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES

The Early Childhood National Reform Symposium was held in Adelaide, on 27 November 2015, to seek contributions to the proposed national early childhood reforms. The symposium was hosted by South Australian Premier Jay Weatherill.

The symposium was attended by almost 100 representatives from early childhood service providers, education sectors, parent groups, universities and welfare agencies. Participants outlined an aspirational vision for young children and the need for a high-quality early education service system to support them.

They envisaged a service system that supports all children. They wanted to ensure that, our most disadvantaged can access the education and care they need to fulfil their potential to develop, learn and grow. They wanted to foster a community that recognises children's rights and values their contributions – both now and into the future.

To support the symposium, over a two-week period, 90 parents and carers took the time to consider the reform proposals on the South Australian Government's YourSAy online consultation platform.

They were overwhelmingly supportive of the proposals to provide high-quality early childhood education and care in flexible ways that support their children's learning and development, and help them to balance their work and family responsibilities. They also said, however, that services needed to better support their work and family responsibilities.

The purpose of the symposium was to have an open discussion about how the Federation can support the following three early childhood reform proposals:

- **Durable, consistent preschool funding for all children regardless of what kind of preschool they attend**
- **Removing any barriers preventing preschools from being able to offer outside of preschool hours care in order to facilitate choice and assist working families**
- **New ways for states and territories to support and develop disadvantaged and vulnerable children.**

The keynote speaker, Professor Edward (Ted) Melhuish, Professor of Human Development at the University of Oxford, outlined a progressive and evidence-based argument for investing in the early years.

Premier Jay Weatherill described his passion for a more efficient and effective preschool system in Australia and announced his national reform proposal to be presented at the December 2015 Council of Australian Governments (COAG) meeting.

Participants asked questions of a panel that included Premier Jay Weatherill, Education and Child Development Minister Susan Close, Professor Ted Melhuish, Dr Sara Glover, Director of the Mitchell Institute and Samantha Page, Chief Executive Officer of Early Childhood Australia.

A facilitated consultation workshop by Jenny Philip-Harbutt provided a wealth of information about the detail of the proposed reforms that will be used to inform the South Australian Premier's discussion at COAG.

The symposium was moderated Channel 7 senior news reporter Jayne Stinson.



A NEW VISION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD REFORM

Dear colleagues,



It is time we reorganised the responsibilities of governments when it comes to the education system.

At the moment, state governments engage with children from birth to about age one, basically 'lose sight' of them for three years, and then reconnect with them when they enter the preschool and schooling system. This leads to inconsistencies of approach, and it can allow for learning and other developmental problems to become entrenched and, therefore, difficult to remedy.



My vision is to give every child the best possible chance in life

Jay Weatherill MP
PREMIER OF
SOUTH AUSTRALIA



My view is that we should have a neater, more logical and more effective 'split' between jurisdictions. Under this model, state governments would have responsibility from birth to the end of secondary school. The Commonwealth Government would be in charge of everything beyond – universities, vocational education and training.

Such a change would mean better outcomes for children and young people – especially those with learning difficulties – and an uninterrupted focus on a child's early years. Having state governments oversee children from birth to 18 also ensures we maintain a clear 'line of sight' when it comes to keeping them safe.

There are three elements to my plan:

The first is a new, more durable and consistent arrangement for Commonwealth preschool funding. At the moment, Commonwealth Government funding varies greatly across the country. Under the new system, all children – no matter where they live and what kind of preschool they attend – will be entitled to the same level of funding on an ongoing basis.

The second element is to change the subsidy rules and remove the barriers that currently prevent preschools from being able to offer care outside of school hours. All preschools should be able to provide such care so that busy working families do not have to move their children from one centre to another during the day. This will save a lot of hassle for parents and, in some cases, make it possible for them to enter the workforce.

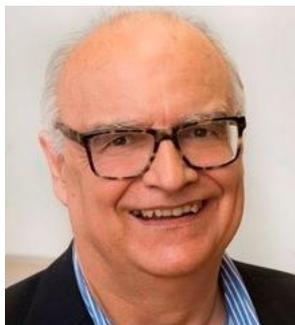
The third and final element of the proposal is the creation of new ways for governments to support vulnerable or disadvantaged children. In the event of COAG agreeing to new arrangements that result in increased Commonwealth preschool funding, states and territories could reinvest any savings into early childhood services for the disadvantaged. This could mean a big rise in the number of vulnerable three-year-olds having access to preschool.



L-R: Samantha Page, Jay Weatherill, Dr Sara Glover, Professor Edward Melhuish, Susan Close

MESSAGES FROM KEYNOTE PRESENTATION

Professor Edward (Ted) Melhuish



The early years are the most important in setting up the trajectories that will lead to favourable outcomes at both an individual and population level.

There is a huge potential for language learning in the early years. A child at age three with poor language development will have problems later in schooling unless we effectively intervene.

There is profound evidence that both the quality and duration of preschool have long-lasting effects including on literacy and numeracy skills, cognitive skills, social development and lead to higher employment levels and personal earnings. High-quality preschools have well trained staff with less staff turnover.

Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, Iceland and Finland spend more on early childhood than other OECD countries.

Factors that influence quality outcomes (other than a high-quality preschool) include the mother's education, a good home learning environment, socio-economic status, family income and a good-quality primary school.

Positive parenting is also very important. Some studies have shown that high-quality parenting resulted in double the positive effects of early childhood education and care. It is, however, much harder, as a population, to influence parenting than it is to increase high-quality preschool.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) & the Welfare of Nations

Edward Melhuish
University of Oxford



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[Click on image above to view Ted's presentation](#)

Factors that improve a home learning environment include reading to children from birth, practising writing letters together, children hearing many words, and positive affirmations.

Gains from early childhood education and care include:

- improved educational achievement
- a reduction in special education and grade repetition
- a reduction in behaviour problems, delinquency and crime
- improved employment, earning, and a reduction in welfare dependency
- a reduction in smoking, drug use, and depression.

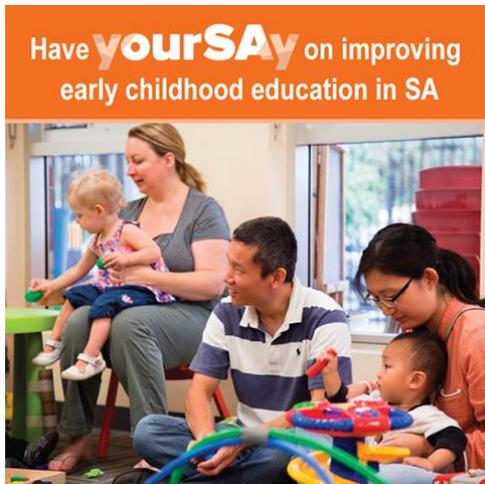
There are also decreased costs to governments, which might take 10 years to fully realise, including schooling costs, social services costs, crime costs and health care costs.

The United Kingdom, having recognised these benefits, from September 2016 will have all three-year-olds and all disadvantaged two-year-olds (40 per cent most deprived) taking part in 30 hours of preschool per week.

The United Kingdom also increased maternity leave to one year, has a new early years curriculum and new training programs for early years staff, and has accepted that the early years are now part of state responsibilities.

STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

The symposium raised a great many issues in early childhood reform. The following are the key implementation ideas that emerged from the conversations and from the [YourSAY conversations online](#).



A new vision for early childhood

Participants at the symposium described a desired future where all three-year-old children attend high-quality preschool. In this desired future:

- there is equitable, universal, free or affordable, access for all children, no matter what their background, with equity of opportunities, irrespective of income and employment status of parents. This universal access is free or affordable
- where a child lives will not reduce access to quality services (whether rural and remote)
- children are engaged and excited in a happy environment where they feel safe. There will be consistent relationships with educators and reduced transition points from childcare to preschool to school. Children are confident, creative and engaged learners
- all families are welcome, there is a focus on community and embracing the family as a whole. The services support the family structure and commitments. There is a high level of professional learning for staff, and staff retention is excellent. There is an increased value of work of the early childhood staff. The effects of improved wellbeing are felt throughout the community, economic benefits are realised and early childhood educators are highly valued.

Proposal 1: Durable, consistent preschool funding for all children regardless of what kind of preschool they attend.

Participants called for national consistency in preschool funding to simplify schooling for families, including those moving from state to state. They asked for opportunities to support families through services of multi-disciplinary teams.

Participants also requested that language is clarified and standardised (eg what does *preschool* mean?) Preschool may be delivered in a broad range of settings based on family need. A strong theme was for a stable funding model that is clear for families with transparent, consistent and relatively simple processes for early learning.

A new funding model should not be complicated. Participants suggested exploring a funding formula per child and then allowing states/territories to decide how to use that funding to meet local needs (not to be interpreted as a potential 'voucher' system). This funding should be ongoing, to support high-quality programs and better performing partnerships 'around the child' (such as health, disability, multiple systems). Participants preferred that funding increase from 15 to 18 hours, stating that this is easier for service planning.

A common theme was the need to ensure that there are no inequities of funding across service providers and the need to assess vulnerability of children.

'Funding should support appropriately qualified/experienced staff/educators.'

The need to support playgroups and measure quality effectiveness within this new model was also supported.

Proposal 2: Remove any barriers preventing preschools from being able to offer outside of preschool hours care in order to facilitate choice and assist working families.

A common proposition was to have seamless service provision that meets the needs of families.

'Seamless option for families – full day service comes to the child'

It was suggested that the role of childcare workers/teachers could change so that they are able to work all-year-round with staffing shifts to cover a full day. This proposal was thought to reduce stress on families and to support parents/carers to return/stay at work.

Questions were raised about how rural and remote services access or implement out-of-school-hours care when they struggle under existing funding models. This area was thought to need special examination.

Proposal 3: New ways for states and territories to support and develop disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

Participants spoke about the need to define vulnerable and disadvantaged children – and to then have a set of measures to track these children’s progress (from 0-4) much earlier than the current Australian Early Development Census.

There was a view that this could be developed nationally and that further national connections could be built through forums such as this Symposium. It was recognised that a ‘one-size-fits-all approach’ is not desired and that we need to accept that solutions will not be ‘neat and tidy’. A more practical approach was suggested as a ‘team around the child’ approach to provide ‘seamless services.’

‘Ensure that the principles of choice, equality and inclusion are fundamental to new models of service provision.’

The importance of having a deinstitutionalised model was highlighted, where staff with specialist skills can work well together.

Participants wanted early childhood educators to be supported with training on methods regarding working with vulnerable and disadvantaged children.



Parents and carers’ views and ideas

Availability of before and after preschool care, greater flexibility and choice

Parents and carers spoke about the stress associated with ‘juggling’ – getting children between preschool and home, particularly when working full time.

‘I’ve had many a friend comment that kindy hours seem to be suited to a time where only one parent worked.’

‘It would be helpful if all kindergartens provided after-school care for working parents. The kindergarten my child will be attending finishes at 3pm and doesn’t offer after-hours care. I don’t know many working people who usually finish at 3pm during the day.’

There are some centres that want to offer flexibility to families but are unable to do so.

Current barriers include some kindergarten and preschool sessions not being able to be accessed in conjunction with long day care. Problems were exacerbated in regional areas where childcare facilities and services were limited.

Parents and carers report not knowing what early learning services are available, and they want to have more information – perhaps through a website. Online respondents called for greater flexibility in the workforce so parents are not required to put their children in 10 hours of care a day so they can attend work. Childcare hours also need to be extended to accommodate shift work and commuting times.

Preschool costs too high

‘It would be great if the cost of preschool at our childcare centre was more like that at the government kindy. A single 10-week term of childcare in the ‘kindy room’ costs us about \$1000 after rebates, compared with about \$150 for similar hours at the government preschool – even though they both use the same curriculum.’

Extended childcare hours to accommodate extended working hours and commuting times

'We are lucky that we have an OHSC, long day and kindy system on the same site as school so will be able to obtain care after kindy hours. It also means that we are able to facilitate care for all our children who are at long day care, kindy and school. There should be more multi-care sites available and the sizes increased [so] more families have their children cared for in one place. For the children this has the advantage of offering them the security of continuing through care in a familiar environment.'

More services for disadvantaged children

'I work with a number of disadvantaged children and the earlier they can get support and input the better.'

Identifying the vulnerable and disadvantaged children is something that is seen to be a hurdle. Early systematic identification measures were called for.

Parents and carers agreed that an expanded preschool program for three-year-olds was a great idea for children who need it most, such as disadvantaged and vulnerable children. This could be strengthened by programs that support parents to build their parenting capacity as their children's first teachers. A new model could include engaging with parents from antenatal through until their child is school age, having a multi-disciplinary 'team around the child'.

Some children were seen to need further early intervention and need to be protected not to fall into gaps.

'There should be opportunities for children with developmental delays, communication disorders and/or autism spectrum disorder (or indeed those children with physical disability or chronic health needs who do not yet have the stamina for a full day or reception) to stay at kindy for two years until they are six. These families (where the disability is already known) should not have to delay starting kindy – this will give them the best shot at a smooth transition from kindy to school, rather than having a "gap" year and nothing to serve them.'