



Right From the Start

Early Childhood Intervention Australia
Victorian Chapter

State Budget Submission 2010/2011





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November 2009

Early Childhood Intervention Australia - Victorian Chapter [ECIA (VC)] is the peak body representing the management and staff of non-government Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS), and the children and families who access such services in the state of Victoria. ECIS are the major providers of: family information; education and support; child education and therapy; consultation with preschool and childcare services; and community support and education about young children with developmental delays and disabilities below school age and their families.



Our Vision

Children of all abilities can fully participate in family and community life.

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Summary ECIA (VC) Budget Bid 2010/11

Numerous Government reports have identified deficiencies in the early childhood intervention system in Victoria and the need for significant reform¹. Whilst the Victorian Government has expressed its commitment to giving children with developmental delays and disabilities the best possible start to life², the following issues are yet to be addressed:

- **Too many children are waiting too long:** Children with developmental delays and disabilities in Victoria are experiencing significant delays in accessing early childhood intervention and are missing out on potentially beneficial intervention and support during a key development stage³.
- **Families do not get the support they need:** Families caring for children with disabilities are experiencing chronic stress from the care-giving and emotional demands of learning about and adapting to their child's disabilities, and navigating the complex service system that is meant to help them.
- **Lack of capacity for universal services to respond to the needs of children with developmental delays and disabilities:** The assumption that early childhood intervention services can (or should) meet all the needs of children with disabilities and developmental delays and their families is resulting in inadequate responses by universal services⁴.

To address these issues, Early Childhood Intervention Australia (Victorian Chapter) calls for the following principles to be endorsed to guide the development of ECI services in Victoria:

- **“Our children can’t wait”:** All children eligible for early childhood intervention to have access within 3 months of referral;
- **“Families moving forward”** - The family of every child with a disability or developmental delay (0-6 years) to be sufficiently supported (emotional support, information and advice, assistance to identify and address needs, service coordination and advocacy)
- **“Universal Education Guarantee”:** All children to have the same opportunities to actively participate in high quality universal early childhood education and care and programs;

To achieve the level of service needed to adequately support children with disabilities and their families, ECIA (VC) calls for the following commitment in the 2010/11 State Budget:

- **Our children can’t wait** - 500 additional Early Childhood Intervention places to be funded in 2010/11 to reduce waiting list time (\$2.7 million per annum);
- **Families moving forward** - Specific funding for early childhood intervention professionals to provide families of children with developmental delays and disabilities intensive information and support “right from the start” to become assertive and confident in their parenting (\$50 million per annum);
- **Universal education guarantee** - Additional funding for early childhood intervention professionals to provide professional support and mentoring to staff of universal services (\$19 million per annum) and an increase in the availability of additional staffing to enable children with developmental delays and disabilities to actively participate in high quality universal early childhood education and care (\$8.5 million per annum).

¹ DHS 2005; DEECD 2008, KPMG 2008

² Government response to Reform of early childhood intervention - strategies and actions 2009

³ Reform of early childhood intervention - strategies and actions 2008

⁴ Reform of early childhood intervention - strategies and actions 2008



Message from the President



The importance of the early years has been widely recognised and reflected in the level of activity currently taking place in the early childhood sector in Victoria. Government initiatives such as the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, and funding for the development of a Quality Framework for the early childhood intervention services (ECIS) sector are greatly welcome. Much work, however, remains to be done to address and overcome the well-reported difficulties currently experienced by children with developmental delays/disabilities and their families.

With the current policy focus on quality early childhood education and care, we must not lose sight of those factors closely associated with their development, including families and communities. Specifically, for young children with developmental delays/disabilities, contemporary ECIS evidence contends that children develop and learn best in their own natural milieus such as their families and community contexts. It is for this reason that additional resources need to be provided to strengthen these key areas, which will ultimately impact on their educational achievements and life long opportunities.

Today, it is imperative that community services be more responsive to the additional needs of children with disabilities. In order to meet this aim, staff who support these children need to be in a strong position through active support, mentoring and professional development. Similarly, families need emotional support, information, advice and support to access community based services. It is unfortunate that current ECIS funding assumes a role that is exclusively child focussed; it is inadequate to fulfil the broader role now recognised as best practice.

ECIA (VC) looks forward to a continued working partnership and dialogue with the State Government in designing service improvements for the benefit of young children, families and community. In the meantime, we need to ensure that all children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families are provided with the necessary support and opportunities to achieve positive outcomes “right from the start”.

I present to you the ECIA (VC) Budget Bid for 2010/11.

Susana Gavidia-Payne
President
Early Childhood Intervention Australia (Victorian Chapter)



Why invest in Early Childhood Intervention?

Access to timely and adequate early childhood intervention (ECI) has been demonstrated to improve outcomes for children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families (Shonkoff & Meisels, 1990). Outcomes for early childhood intervention include both personal benefits for the child and their family⁵ as well as longer term savings for improved educational outcomes, better labour market performance, reduced dependence on public assistance and lower levels of criminal activity.

In Victoria, these outcomes cannot be realised without additional investment.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development “Reform of early childhood intervention - strategies and actions” report was released in November 2009. In response to this report, the Victorian Government provided funding in the 2009/10 budget to develop a quality framework for early childhood intervention. Whilst this initiative is welcomed, achieving high quality outcomes for children cannot be achieved without recognising the urgent need for additional investment in early childhood intervention service provision. The Government report acknowledges the need for additional investment focusing on:

- Additional capacity for responding to needs of children and families earlier, and to provide a greater level of service in early years than can currently be provided; and
- Additional inclusion support for children attending kindergarten and child care.

The current level of investment in early childhood intervention is inadequate and demand is growing. The Victorian Government is failing to provide children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families opportunities to be the best they can be. Delays in accessing effective assistance result in:

- Lost opportunities to minimise the effects of disability resulting in distress, unnecessary ongoing dependency and more costly services throughout life;
- Lost opportunities for families to provide optimal family life due to poor mental health, family distress and breakdown;
- Lost opportunities for children with disabilities to benefit from greater participation in quality, universal early childhood education and care setting, sharing enjoyment and play, making friends, learning with others and achieving alongside their peers.

Whilst the Early childhood intervention service system in Victoria employs highly trained professionals who can provide flexible services, the expectations about the amount and variety of support they can provide within the current unit price (\$5,418 per target) are untenable. Early childhood intervention professionals are currently under extreme pressure to adequately support children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families within significant funding constraints. Early childhood intervention professionals, and the ECI service system in general, cannot continue to function at this unsustainable level of funding.

Why is increased investment so urgent?

Simply, because our children cannot wait.

⁵ ECIA (VC) Outcomes for Early Childhood Intervention Statement

Recommendations for additional investment.

Recommendations	Detail	Estimated Cost
1) Our Children Can't Wait	Additional 500 ECI places at current cost of \$5418 in 2010/11.	\$2.7 million
2) Families Moving Forward	50 hours of support per annum for families of children with developmental delays and disabilities 0-6 years (\$5,000 per family for 10,000 families per annum).	\$50 million per annum
3) Universal Education Guarantee	<p>a) Professional Support from ECI professionals to Universal Services: to improve educational programs and achieve early childhood outcomes (\$5,000 per child for 3,800 children).</p> <p>b) Increased inclusion support to match the level of support provided in schools (at least 2.4% of 4 year old kindergarten participants - additional 976 packages @ \$8,715 each*) to ensure children achieve early childhood outcomes.</p>	<p>\$19 million per annum</p> <p>\$8.5 million</p>

** In 2010, there will be 704 Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) packages which represent approximately 1% of the 4 year old kindergarten population (based on 70,000 births per year).*

The 2008 State of Victoria's Children Report indicates that in Victoria, 7% of the population has a disability.

In Victorian government schools, approximately 3% of children are provided with support through the Program for Students with a Disability.⁶

⁶ Reform of early childhood intervention - strategies and actions 2008

RECOMMENDATION 1

Our children can't wait



Children with developmental delays and disabilities in Victoria are waiting too long for crucial early childhood intervention services that are needed early and timely to enhance child development, minimise potential delays, remediate existing problems, prevent further deterioration, and/or promote adaptive family functioning⁷.

It is well established that the period from birth to eight years of age and especially the first three years of life, set the foundation for future social, physical, emotional and cognitive development⁸. Unfortunately, in Victoria, it is not uncommon for children with disabilities to wait until they are three or four years old before they access early childhood intervention. The learning and developmental opportunities of the earlier years are lost.

In May 2009, there were over 1,170 children on waiting lists for early childhood intervention in Victoria. The “Reform of early childhood intervention - strategies and actions report” acknowledges that with the average increase of 75 children per month to the ECIS waiting list and demographic growth, an additional 1,000 ECI places will be required by 2011/12.

The impact of the new maternal child health screening procedures also needs to be factored into estimates for demand for early childhood intervention. Whilst the new screening procedures are welcomed, the impact of an increase in referrals to ECI needs to be addressed. In addition to more identification of developmental delays and disabilities, identification will be earlier. Children may need ECI for a longer time, which will create further demand on the early childhood intervention service system.

Victoria needs more early childhood intervention places.
Our children can't wait.

⁷ Shonkoff & Meisels, 1990

⁸ DEECD Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development

Our Children Can't Wait.

My son Anthony was diagnosed with autism in 2005 at the age of two. Not only was this diagnosis completely unexpected, but the devastation it caused was swift and complete. Our lives forever changed the instant our paediatrician delivered the news to us in a casual manner that belied the gravity of the message it contained. I recall sensing my behavior was inappropriate as the tears sprang to my eyes, so I wiped them away and listened in numb silence. We left with little information, a few suggested resources, and the understanding that an early intervention service would contact us. I couldn't believe so little was happening when our lives had been so completely shattered.

Waiting for contact from the early intervention services was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do. There are so many questions, so much confusion and so little guidance. At the time I had no understanding of autism, or the support system I would eventually have to put into place to begin the long process of education and development for my son. My four month wait time seemed eternal as fear and anxiety built up within me. Until I was contacted by the professionals, I had no idea where to turn, and our family's wellbeing hung in the balance throughout that time. It was a time of disconnection and loneliness, as we tried to grapple with our isolation in the face of mounting grief. Contact from Illoura was a welcome lifeline, and the introduction to early intervention services eased our anxiety and gave us a starting place to learn to cope as a family, and most importantly help our son.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Families Moving Forward

Many families caring for children with disabilities are experiencing chronic stress⁹ and increasingly, families are presenting with mental health disorders.

Lack of support to care for their child with a disability can be detrimental to the emotional wellbeing of family members and the development of the child. Early childhood intervention practitioners need the resources to assist families when it is needed. This work is extensive and includes:

- providing emotional support to parents through the adjustment period of having a child with additional needs and the grieving process which often accompanies this;
- supporting families to manage the additional pressures and access community supports;
- mentoring families to manage everyday routines to facilitate the development of their child;
- assisting families to navigate the maze of services/funding provided by different jurisdictions (local, state and federal governments);
- providing families with information and advice when it is needed;
- supporting families as they become advocates for their child's needs; and
- helping parents build positive relationships with their children and developing the skills to meet their child's developmental needs.

Only families can provide children with the secure foundations they need to develop to their potential.

⁹ 'The Well Being of Australians: Carer Health and Well-being' (2007) report by Bob Cummings



Families Need Support

An extract from "A Life Unwritten", a web story in which Liza Maloney wonders why no manual could tell her what to expect when her child was diagnosed with a disability, as published in Melbourne's Child, October 2009:

I remember the day our daughter was diagnosed like it was yesterday. We sat in the paediatric neurologist's rooms and tried to comprehend the words "your daughter has autism, a lifelong disability." We had only just celebrated her second birthday. We returned home that afternoon to one of the worst storms the region had ever experienced. Our home was without power for the following three days. The irony was not lost on us. The darkness was symbolic of a journey into the unknown that we had only just begun. That journey began without any teaching manual..... Not a single text existed that could describe the loneliness and isolation that came with having a child with a disability. Nothing to prepare us for the pain of realising that our child would never call us Mummy or Daddy, or tell us that she loved us. That it would take more than six years to teach our child to reciprocate a hug...

RECOMMENDATION 3

Universal Education Guarantee

Children with developmental delays/disabilities need the same opportunities to actively participate in universal early childhood programs to meet early childhood outcomes¹⁰.

A) Professional Support for children's services

Unlike their typical peers, children with disabilities will not benefit fully from attending child care and kindergarten unless staff understand their abilities. Staff rely on visiting early childhood intervention practitioners to provide information about individual children. Currently, these practitioners are only able to visit children's services approximately 3-4 times a year.

Current kindergarten inclusion support is not adequate to support the learning and educational outcomes recommended as part of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) for all children. Much mentoring and coaching of children's services staff will be required to ensure active and successful participation of children with disabilities, so they meet the outcomes of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework.

With adequate funding, early childhood intervention practitioners would be able to provide specialised support¹¹ and consultation to universal services to achieve and maintain successful inclusion. With increased skills, confidence and knowledge, children's services are more likely to welcome children with developmental delays and disabilities into their programs and increase opportunities for parents to return to the workforce.

B) Kindergarten Inclusion Support

All children with disabilities need to access inclusion support when they need it, not when they qualify for it according to some arbitrary criteria. Currently, only 1% of the kindergarten population has access to inclusion support. This percentage needs to be increased to at least 2.4% to ensure children with disabilities have access to the supports necessary to achieve educational outcomes.

¹⁰ Belonging, Being & Becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia. DEEWR for the Council of Australian Governments, 2009.

¹¹ Professional Support: Through regular communication, education and mentoring, early childhood intervention practitioners can build the skills and programs within universal early childhood services to promote active and successful participation of all children.



All children need access to education.

An extract from "Equipped for Life" by Marlena Katene (Melbourne's Child, October 2009)

I have cerebral palsy and despite being non-verbal and in a wheelchair, I was fortunate to complete my Year 12 qualification alongside my peers. I know I was lucky to have a wonderful team of people around me, but I did not really appreciate my inclusive education until this year. This year I have travelled overseas to the USA and Japan, started studying business management, have continued to improve the running of my small business and also bought my first car. All of this would not have been possible if I had not experienced an inclusive education. Because of inclusive education, I am now doing okay. I now have a future and will be a taxpayer rather than being dependent on a pension.

Despite the diverse background students come from, with clear goals and creative ways of delivering education, anyone can achieve whatever it is they want to. All people have something to offer, and through many wonderful people recognising my unique learning style and supporting me in providing real learning opportunities, my future is looking bright.



Meeting State Government's policies, guidelines and priorities.

The priorities in this document are reflected and build upon the State Government's vision for children. We believe this additional investment is vital to ensure that Victoria is a State in which:

- There is the right mix of places, professionals and high quality programs to meet the changing needs of children, young people and families; provide opportunities; promote positive outcome; intervene early and prevent harm.
- Parents and families are enabled to care effectively for their child and supported to act in his or her best interests
- Communities recognise and respect children and young people, value their diversity and culture, and build connectedness and resilience among them and their families.

We support the view that improving health and developmental outcomes for children is a joint responsibility of parents, carers and government on behalf of the community, as outlined in the COAG National Reform Agenda: Victoria's Plan to improve outcomes in early childhood 2007. The plan also acknowledges the importance of **intervening early** to reduce the impact of emerging child health or developmental difficulties.

The DEECD Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development identifies that parents and families are valued partners in their children's development and learning and that some children need extra or more individualised opportunities and support in order to achieve their best.

At a Federal level, the importance of the early years was reflected in the 2007 Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreement to pursue substantial reform in the area of early childhood development. As part of this initiative, COAG has reached agreement to fund universal access to 4 year old kindergarten from 2013. The benefits of kindergarten are equally, if not more, important for children with developmental delays and disabilities. The capacity to include children with developmental delays and disabilities need to be addressed as part of the COAG commitment to 15 hours of kindergarten.

Conclusion

Whilst Early Childhood Intervention Australia (Victorian Chapter) strongly supports the Victorian Government's commitment to quality early childhood education, the needs of children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families urgently need to be addressed. One in forty children in Victoria needs access to early childhood intervention. This intervention needs to be early, and it needs to be funded adequately to ensure families are well supported and all children have access to quality early childhood education and care. We call on the Victorian Government to adequately resource early childhood intervention so that we can support children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families "right from the start".