

Reform of early childhood intervention – strategies and actions

Government Response
November 2009

*Every
child,
every
opportunity*



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Foreword

It is with great pleasure that I provide you with details of progress made on the reform of early childhood intervention services in Victoria and outline future directions for reform.

The early years are the foundation for a child's healthy development and readiness for lifelong learning. All young Victorians should have access to and participate in opportunities that support and promote their optimum health, development, learning, safety and well-being. For some young children, including those with disability or developmental delay, extra efforts are required so that they have access to and participate successfully in these opportunities and that those who nurture them are supported in their efforts to do so.

The Victorian Government shares a commitment and responsibility with families, communities and early childhood intervention services to give young children with disability or developmental delay the best possible start in life. This is reflected in a significant increase in funding of 162 per cent since coming to office in 1999.

The work undertaken to date highlights that early childhood intervention services provide a range of services for children with disability or developmental delay and their families, giving them access to flexible and responsive specialist supports developed and delivered within the context of universal services.

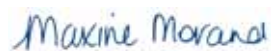
The project report, *Reform of early childhood intervention – strategies and actions*, affirms the value and importance of early childhood intervention services for young children and their families and identifies many strengths in the current system.

The report also identifies key areas for improvement and makes recommendations to support a more effective and efficient system of services and supports for young children with disability and developmental delay and their families.

The Government's response to the review outlines changes and improvements that are underway and will assist to improve outcomes for children with a disability or developmental delay. Through these changes we will build an improved system of services and supports so that these young Victorians are given the opportunity to thrive, learn and develop and reach their full potential.

By working together to progress early childhood intervention reform, we will make changes so that young children with disability and developmental delay and their families get the supports they need within an efficient and responsive system.

I look forward to working with you to give every child every opportunity for a healthy and successful future.



Maxine Morand

Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development

1 Policy Context

The reform of early childhood intervention services is being undertaken within the context of broader Government policy.

A Fairer Victoria is our Government's landmark action plan to reduce disadvantage and share our State's prosperity with more Victorians by building stronger and more inclusive communities. A key focus within *A Fairer Victoria* is giving children the best start in life.

The *Victorian State Disability Plan* describes a whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach to improving the quality of life for Victorians with a disability. The Government's vision for the future is that Victoria will be a state where there are caring, safe and accessible communities in which opportunities are shared fairly, and where all Victorians have access to a range of services that support their quality of life.

The Autism State Plan describes a whole of government, whole of community approach to supporting people with an Autism spectrum disorder and their families to fulfil their maximum potential enjoy life and contribute to their community.

The *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development 2008* sets out the Government's commitment to ensuring that every young Victorian thrives, learns and grows to enjoy a productive, rewarding and fulfilling life, while contributing to their local and global communities.

The reform agenda outlined in the *Blueprint* is organised under the key strategies of system improvement, workforce reform and partnerships with parents and communities.

The *Blueprint* commitment to develop a whole-of-government strategy for children and young people aged 0-18 with a disability or developmental delay includes progressing the early childhood intervention reform project that commenced in 2008. The whole-of-government strategy will be underpinned by timely intervention and support, a life cycle approach to services to address specific developmental needs and transitional stages, better coordinated services across government agencies and provide active support for children and their families to build their capabilities for more independent living.

To date, the early childhood intervention reform project has included the preparation of two core documents - a review of the literature and research evidence base and a review of early childhood intervention services.

The purpose of this document is to summarise the findings of these two papers and to outline Government's plan to progress reform in the early childhood intervention service system based on these findings.

2 Early Childhood Intervention Literature and Research Evidence Base

The Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne has prepared a review of the early childhood intervention literature and research evidence base. The report identifies some key features of quality and effectiveness in early childhood intervention services:

- Effective programs are based upon clear, scientifically-validated theoretical frameworks and methodologies that articulate how services are delivered and the desired outcomes
- Early interventions are more effective than later efforts
- Children with disabilities and their families need access to local and affordable early childhood services
- Family- centred help giving is associated with more positive family and child functioning
- The ultimate goal of early childhood intervention is to enable families to nurture and support their children, identify and address their needs and have the resources they need to participate in their communities
- Effective services are sensitive and responsive to family and community context
- Relationships between parents and professionals are the key to effective practice
- Services and supports are integrated at every level
- Services and supports are based upon the promotion of inclusion
- Early childhood intervention services are staffed by people trained and supported to provide high quality, flexible, responsive and individualised services and supports.

The literature review also identifies a move toward a universally designed approach to services for all young children and their families as an effective way to ensure genuine participation, amelioration of disadvantage and improved developmental, learning and health outcomes for all children. Services need to be able to respond to the particular needs of the children and families they serve and, therefore, additional supports need to be provided within the universal service context. This approach supports a commitment to all children and families, equity in service provision, earlier identification and recognition of children and families with additional needs and better responses to families with increasingly complex needs.

3 Review of Early Childhood Intervention Services

KPMG were engaged to review early childhood intervention services and to provide advice about:

- The adequacy of early childhood intervention services for children aged birth to 6 with a disability or developmental delay
- Demand pressures on early childhood intervention services and variations in access by region and equity groups (indigenous, migrant and refugee children)
- The adequacy of early childhood intervention funding arrangements and, where applicable, unit prices
- Transition issues into, and linkages between, early childhood intervention, kindergarten, school and other relevant service providers
- Workforce development issues.

An Advisory Group to support the project was established with membership including representatives from early childhood intervention services, peak bodies and client advocacy groups and stakeholder consultations were held. In addition over 50 written submissions were received.

The reform of early childhood intervention- strategies and actions report (KPMG 2008) proposes principles to underpin service provision and identifies key strengths and areas for improvement in the current delivery of services and supports for children with a disability and their families.

4 Findings

4.1 Principles

The report proposes the following principles to guide the development and provision of early childhood supports and services for children with a disability or developmental delay and their families:

- A child centred and family focussed approach which is strengths-based and solutions focused
- Provision of appropriate, high quality, evidence-based and timely early intervention services and support for both children and their families
- A life cycle approach to the planning and provision of services to address the specific needs of each developmental stage and the transitions between them
- Service delivery is integrated and coordinated across government programs and services
- Early childhood intervention services are based on high quality and timely individualised planning with a focus on achieving measured outcomes
- Cost-effective activities that provide the best return on investment measured against outcomes
- Services and supports are targeted to the greatest need for children and families
- Build the capacity of universal services to successfully include children aged 0-6 years with a disability or developmental delay
- Services and supports are available in a child's local community
- Services and supports are culturally proficient and responsive.

4.2 Key strengths

The report identifies the following strengths within the current early childhood intervention service system:

- Services and programs are generally responsive to children's and families' individual needs, strengths and circumstances
- Service providers are flexible in the provision of services and supports to families
- The workforce is generally skilled, knowledgeable and committed and provides appropriate interventions and responses for both children and their families.

4.3 Key areas for improvement

The report identifies nine key areas for improvement:

- A need for a clear policy framework for early childhood intervention and universal services
- Funding to respond to the level and range of support needs of children with a disability or developmental delay and their families
- Recruitment and retention of suitable staff and investment in professional development
- Linkages between universal and early childhood intervention services
- System fragmentation and multiple entry points, resulting in a system that is difficult for families to navigate
- Consistency in intake processes across regions and programs
- Service coordination and linkages across programs
- Strengthen supports at key transition points, including kindergarten to school
- Quality data to support planning, performance monitoring and evaluation.

5 Key recommendations

The report proposes that early childhood intervention services be based on a service system model which recognises that early childhood intervention supports and services are part of, and not separate from, the suite of supports and services for all Victorian children and their families.

The report makes three broad recommendations for consideration. The Government's response to each of the broad recommendations is outlined below.

5.1 Strengthen early childhood intervention services

The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring that all young Victorians have the best possible start in life and are provided with opportunities that support their growth and development. The Government is also committed to ensuring that those who nurture young children are supported in their care giving efforts.

The Government is further committed to ensuring that young children with a disability or developmental delay and their families have access to high quality and timely support.

We will work with key stakeholders to strengthen early childhood intervention by:

- Intervening early and building individual and family capacity across the life course
- Integrating planning and assessment at central and regional levels
- Supporting the non-government sector to implement reform
- Focussing on inclusion and participation in universal services, supported by specialist services.

Significant progress has already been achieved. The *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development 2008* committed to the development of a whole-of-government strategy for children and young people aged 0-18 with a disability or developmental delay including progressing early childhood intervention reform. The 2009-10 State budget allocated \$4 million over four years towards this strategy. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in partnership with the Department of Human Services is progressing these initiatives including:

- The development of a common assessment and planning framework
- Strengthened regional planning networks to improve co-ordination and planning for children and young people with a disability or developmental delay at critical points of transition
- The development of a new data collection on outcomes for children and young people with disabilities or developmental delay.

These initiatives will set the groundwork for **implementing consistent assessment, planning and prioritisation processes** across the 0-18 age group and for **improving transitions and coordination** at both the **child and family** and **service provider level**.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is working to strengthen pathways and **improve transitions** from kindergarten to school for children with significant disabilities through the extension of *Sharing Our Journey* in the context of *Transition: A Positive Start to School initiative*.

The 2008-09 State budget committed \$1.8 million for the development of an early childhood intervention **workforce** strategy that involves up skilling the workforce, recruiting and retaining workers across the state, with a particular focus on rural areas and supporting specialised post-graduate training and mentoring programs. This strategy was further strengthened with an investment of \$1.9 million in the 2009-10 State budget.

The Government has also invested \$8.2 million in the Autism State Plan to help Victorians with an autism spectrum disorder. Families who have children with autism aged 0-6 will benefit from further investment in the **Autism Secondary Consultation and Training Strategy** which provides secondary consultation and mentoring to the early childhood workforce to further assist them provide individualised responses to children with an autism spectrum disorder with complex issues. This includes \$600,000 for training, mentoring and resources and almost \$700,000 to support regional professional autism networks to identify local training needs.

\$1.915 million was allocated in June 2009 to support early childhood intervention service agencies to progress reform within their organisation through professional development, business planning or the purchase of additional resources such as assessment tools and professional libraries.

The roll out of the Maternal and Child Health Key Ages and Stages service activity framework provides a consistent approach to developmental assessment that **will improve the capacity of this universal service** to detect children at risk of developmental delay early and further support the **linkages and transitions** between universal and specialist services.

Entry points for early childhood intervention services for families of children with a disability or developmental delay across the state **continue to be strengthened** through:

- The development of early childhood intervention services intake guidelines to support consistent statewide practice
- Strengthening central intake for early childhood intervention services in Eastern Metropolitan Region
- Further developing early support responses in all regions to assist children and their families with timely access to supports and/or services.

5.2 Strengthen program planning, governance and accountability

The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring that children with a disability or developmental delay and their families have access to high quality, effective and accountable services and supports.

The 2009-10 State Budget allocated \$5 million over four years to strengthen the quality of early childhood intervention services across Victoria. This includes the development of a quality assurance framework incorporating revised program standards, best practice guidelines for workers and an evaluation and performance monitoring system to support accountability in early childhood intervention services. Work on these initiatives has commenced in consultation with stakeholders.

An expanded workforce strategy will continue the investment in the early childhood intervention services workforce. Building on the statement of early childhood intervention services competencies developed by Early Childhood Intervention Australia (Victorian Chapter) Inc, accredited training modules will be delivered so that early childhood intervention services staff have access to up to date knowledge and skills that they require to deliver high quality services.

The 2009-10 State budget also allocated funding to strengthen regional planning networks to improve coordination and planning for children and young people and undertake developmental work on a new data collection system on outcomes for children and young people with disabilities or developmental delay to enable the monitoring of trends and planning of services to better meet the needs of children and their families.

The development of guidelines for data reporting for early childhood intervention and kindergarten inclusion support agencies will improve the **quality of data reporting**.

5.3 Additional investment

The report also identified a need for the Government to further consider the level of investment in Early Childhood Intervention Services, Kindergarten Inclusion Support packages and the Preschool Field Officer Program.

Since coming into office in 1999, the Victorian State Government has increased its investment in early childhood intervention services by 162 percent – from \$23 million in 1999-00 to \$60.3 million in 2009-10.

The 2008-09 State budget provided \$29 million over four years to boost investment in early childhood intervention services through improving services and cutting waiting lists. This included \$23.9 million for additional early childhood intervention places delivering direct support for around 1000 more children. 500 early childhood intervention places were allocated in 2008-09. A further 500 early childhood intervention places have been allocated in 2009-10. This means that the number of early childhood intervention places has increased from 8,470 in 2005 to 9,820 places in 2009.

The 2008-09 State budget also allocated \$3.3 million for an additional 150 Kindergarten Inclusion Support packages, over four years, to help children with very high and complex needs to participate in a mainstream kindergarten program. 50 Kindergarten Inclusion Support packages were allocated in 2008-09. 25 packages are being allocated in 2009-10, with a further 25 in 2010-11 and the remaining 50 in 2011-12.

In addition to this, over \$757,000 has recently been announced to provide a further 35 Kindergarten Inclusion Support packages, and to increase the level of funding available for the coordination of these packages. It is anticipated that this further investment will meet projected demand for support in the coming years.

6 Future Reform

Reform in early childhood intervention is an important part of whole-of-government strategy for children and young people aged 0-18 with a disability or developmental delay.

The Government, in developing this broader strategy, will incorporate, and build on the reform outlined in this Government response. The 0-18 strategy will incorporate strategic directions across Government and continue to draw on the learnings from the review of early childhood intervention.

This reform, together with our continued investment in early childhood will provide all children, including those with a disability or developmental delay, the best start in life.