

Media Information

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## Children at risk of missing the grade

Australian children are at risk of missing out on critical developmental and educational opportunities, warns the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) at The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne.

According to CCCH's latest *Policy Brief: Early Years Care and Education*, there needs to be a paradigm shift in the way Australia views early childhood care and education services. Children's services should universally provide comprehensive developmental programs that integrate play-based education and care from birth to school entry.

"In Australia there is an artificial distinction made between what constitutes child care and early education," explains CCCH's Professor Frank Oberklaid, "Children learn and develop constantly, through a combination of experiences, within and outside the family home, regardless of the setting."

"The very rapid and unplanned expansion of child care services in the last decade has put enormous pressure on the system, with little consideration of the research literature on early child development, nor of the evolving needs of children and families," said Professor Oberklaid.

There is strong research evidence that experiences in the early years predict performance at school and beyond, and that all children, particularly those from disadvantaged or marginalised families, benefit from a high quality preschool experience.

Australia invests significantly less in children's services than other OECD countries and lags well behind countries such as Denmark, Norway and Sweden, which invest around 2% of GDP for children aged 0-3 years. These Nordic countries take a holistic approach to children, closely integrating care with education to ensure that children have a smooth transition to primary school.

Many parents are working longer hours and require daily access to children's services for extended hours and therefore need to put their children into long day care rather than preschool, due to the sessional nature of much of the current system.

"Parents shouldn't be made to choose between 'care' and 'education' for their children," said Professor Oberklaid, "Access to a single, integrated service offering high quality care and education should be the right of every child."



Research has found that the quality of children's services is the overriding factor that impacts on a child's development, which is particularly worrying given that over half of the staff working in Australian children's services do not hold a base qualification in early childhood.

"The early childhood field needs to move towards a mandated entry qualification for service providers working with children and families, which encompasses the combined competencies of care and teacher training," added Professor Oberklaid.

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*Notes to editor*

The Centre for Community Child Health is at the forefront of Australian research into early childhood development and behaviour and its findings are used to inform public policy, service delivery and professional practice. The Centre is a department of The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, a key research centre of the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, and an academic centre of the University of Melbourne.

The Policy Brief series has been made possible through the support of BHP Billiton.

A copy of CCCH's *Policy Brief: 'Early Years Care and Education'* can be accessed online at: [http://www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/ccch/PB8\\_eyce.pdf](http://www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/ccch/PB8_eyce.pdf)

Policy Briefs can also be downloaded from: [www.rch.org.au/ccch/policybriefs.cfm](http://www.rch.org.au/ccch/policybriefs.cfm)

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