

# **The relationship between early childhood intervention and other human services: In search of a new paradigm**

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This paper explores the implications for early childhood intervention services of social changes and the challenges that these have posed for human services. Although based on the Australian experience, many of the developments and problems described are evident in other countries as well.

Over the past two or three decades, there have been significant social and economic changes in many Western societies that have had a profound effect on families and the services that support them. These changes have been accompanied by worsening developmental outcomes for adolescents and young adults. Concerns about these trends have led to concerted efforts to understand the early origins of these problems. All of these developments have led to a better understanding of the nature and significance of the early years and to major efforts to reconfigure early childhood and family support system to achieve better long term outcomes for children.

The paper describes how these changes manifest themselves in Australia, and the consequent problems being experienced by early childhood and family support services, including early childhood intervention services. Families have become more diverse in their structure as well as in ethnic and cultural background. There have also been changes in the circumstances in which families raise young children, and a growth in the number of families with complex needs. As a result of these changes, services for young children and families have experienced increasing difficulties in meeting all the needs of all the families. Early childhood intervention services are no exception to this general trend, with

These changes have implications for all early childhood and family support services. There is a recognition in many countries that these services need to be better integrated and ... In the case of early childhood intervention services, the implications are that they cannot sort out their problems alone and need to be part of the development of an integrated, holistic and universal child and family system. This implies a radical rethinking of the relationship between the specialist early childhood intervention system and mainstream early childhood and family support services.

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## **The changing context of service delivery:**

There are a number of significant social and economic changes that have occurred over the past two or three decades that alter the context in which services are delivered to families of young children. These include:

- Significant changes in families and family circumstances over the past two or three decades
- Difficulties that the existing service system has in providing integrated services to families with complex needs.
- Worsening developmental outcomes for adolescents and young adults, which have prompted renewed efforts to understand the factors that promote or undermine optimal functioning in children and families.

In addition, there are key findings regarding early childhood development that have informed our understanding of how to get best outcomes for children and families.

Each of these is considered in more detail below.

### Changes in families

Regarding **structure**, families have changed significantly over the past two or three decades - they are more varied in their structure, and more diverse culturally and ethnically:

- families are smaller
- childlessness is increasing
- mother's age at first birth is increasing
- more single parents
- more blended families
- more same sex couple families
- more shared custody arrangements

Regarding **cultural and ethnic diversity**, there has been an ongoing influx of migrants and refugees from an ever-widening range of countries, ethnic groups and religions. This contributes to Australia becoming an increasingly diverse and less homogeneous society.

### Changes in family circumstances

The circumstances in which families are raising young children have also changed:

- more parents are working
- more mothers with babies are working
- more parents are doing shift work and working non-standard hours
- more parents are working longer hours
- more families are jobless
- more children are being raised in poverty

Other key social changes include:

- There has been a partial erosion of traditional family and neighbourhood support networks, due to factors such as increased family mobility and the search for affordable housing
- There has been an increase in the number of parents whose own experiences of being parented were compromised, and who therefore have difficulty parenting their own children
- All these factors have contributed to an increase in the number of families with complex needs

- These social changes have also contributed to an undermining of confidence among parents in their ability to raise their children well
- There is no longer a social consensus about the right way to bring up children, or even that there is a single right way
- Overall, parenting young children has become a more complex and more stressful business for many families

### **Challenges currently facing services for children and families**

As a result of these and other factors, early childhood and family support services are struggling to meet the needs of young children and families. The main challenges and problems are as follows:

- First, the service system is having difficulty providing support to all families who are eligible
- Second, services cannot meet all the needs of families that they do serve
  - no single service is capable of meeting the complex needs of many families
  - these unmet needs may loom larger in the lives of parents than the needs of the child with a developmental or mental health problem.
- Third, families have difficulty finding out about and accessing the services they need
- Fourth, services are often not well integrated with one another and are therefore unable to provide cohesive support to families
- Fifth, services have difficulty tailoring their services to meet the diverse needs of families
- Sixth, services are typically treatment-oriented rather than prevention- or promotion-focused, and therefore cannot respond promptly to emerging child and family needs
- Seventh, the service system does not maintain continuous contact with families of young children during the early years
- Eighth, many families are isolated and lack supportive personal networks - extended family, friends or other families of young children
- Ninth, the early childhood field is undervalued and underfunded, and has difficulty attracting and retaining staff
- Tenth, the early childhood workforce does not match the diversity of the families that it serves
- Eleventh, many people working with children and families have not had opportunities to learn about recent early childhood research findings
- Twelfth, many people working with children and families have not been trained in ways of working with families

In addition, there are some more general systemic issues that undermine the effectiveness of early childhood and other human services:

- Government departments, research disciplines and service sectors tend to work in 'silos' – that is, they plan, fund and deliver services independently of one another. This is despite strong evidence for the benefits of a coordinated approach to service delivery.

- The early childhood sector does not present a united front - there is a tendency for particular service types to seek their own preservation at the expense of working collectively towards better outcomes for children and families through improvements in the overall system
- Many health and human services have become over-professionalised and top-heavy, requiring high levels of professional expertise and expensive technology which are not sustainable across the whole population
- While we have developed many effective forms of early intervention addressing a wide range of child and family problems, the cumulative cost of providing all these programs to all those who need them is prohibitive
- Governments are more concerned about promoting general economic growth than reducing economic disparities, despite evidence that wider social inequalities are linked with poorer developmental outcomes.
- Governments spend a disproportionate amount on services for adults and the aged, in comparison to the very young, despite the greater developmental importance of the early years and the greater likelihood of young children living in poverty

### Concern about worsening developmental outcomes

Another important consideration is the evidence of worsening (or unacceptably high) developmental outcomes for adolescents and young adults in most developed nations, including Australia. These outcomes cover the full range of health and well being, as follows:

- **Mental health** - eg. depression, suicide, drug dependence
- **Physical health** - eg. obesity, diabetes, heart disease
- **Academic achievement** - eg. literacy levels, retention rates, educational outcomes
- **Social adjustment** - eg. employment, juvenile crime

All the poor developmental outcomes identified have associated social and financial costs that cumulatively represent a considerable drain on societal resources

This phenomenon has been dubbed 'modernity's paradox' (Keating and Hertzman, 1999):

'A puzzling paradox confronts observers of modern society. We are witnesses to a dramatic expansion of market-based economies whose capacity for wealth generation is awesome in comparison to both the distant and the recent past. At the same time, there is a growing perception of substantial threats to the health and well-being of today's children and youth in the very societies that benefit most from this abundance.'

The developmental pathways that lead to each of these outcomes can be traced back to early childhood, leading to a growing interest in forms of early intervention.

## **New understandings about child development and family functioning**

In addition to the three factors so far mentioned – changes in families and family circumstances, challenges faced by human services, and worsening developmental outcomes – we need to look briefly at recent findings about child development and family functioning. We have learned a huge amount about these in recent years, but we will focus on just two key findings here.

### ■ ***First, both child development and family functioning are shaped by the ongoing interplay among sources of vulnerability or risk and sources of resilience or protection***

- These are multiplicative rather than additive in their effects
- Exposure to adverse conditions does not inevitably damage individuals or thwart development
- Risk and protective factors tend to be pervasive – a person confronting adversity in one context is also likely to be facing it in others as well.
- Behaviour or experiences at one age predispose to the occurrence of risk or protective factors at a later age.
- The implication of these findings is that we need a coordinated systemic strategy to minimise child, family and community risk factors, and to promote protective factors in the lives of young children and their families

### ■ ***Second, personal support networks have major effects on the well-being of children and families***

- Parents with adequate social support networks are less likely to have low birth weight babies, to abuse their children, or to have mental or physical health problems
- Social support mostly influences child functioning by strengthening parents' ability to raise their children effectively
- Informal support has a greater influence on the personal functioning of parents than formal support
- Whether professional support is as effective as informal social support depends upon the nature of the relationship with the professionals - the more the professionals are seen as part of the family's informal network, the more effective they will be
- The implication of these findings is that one of the key ways in which we can promote family functioning is to help them develop or strengthen their personal support networks.

## **Implications for early child and family services**

- The current system of services for young children and their families does not support them as effectively as required and therefore needs to be redesigned from the bottom up
- We need to build stronger personal and community support networks for all families of young children

- We need to build a system of community-based services that is truly integrated (not just better linked or coordinated), easy to access, and responsive to emerging child and family needs
- We need a workforce that is more diverse culturally and professionally, with a higher proportion of community workers relative to professionals
- We need a philosophy and way of delivering services that is common to all forms and levels of service
- We need to address the underlying economic, ecological and social factors that compromise the ability of families to raise their children adequately

This gives us the direction in which we need to move, but it does not tell us what we need to do to get there, or what a more holistic and integrated child and family service system would look like. Governments around the world are grappling with these same issues, and experimenting with a range of ‘joined up’ and ‘wrap-around’ models of service.

However, despite the many uncertainties that we face, there are some things that we can be sure about: In developing and implementing new and more effective ways of delivering services,

- everyone’s input will be needed, including those for whom the services are intended
- service providers and service recipients will need to collaborate
- service providers will need to work together much more closely

In short, we need a new paradigm of service delivery based on partnerships.

### **Implications for early childhood intervention services**

These social and economic changes and the associated problems of service delivery apply equally to families of children with disabilities. In fact, they compound the problems that those families can have, and therefore make the task of supporting them more difficult. As a result, there is likely to be a greater percentage of families that early childhood intervention services are less able to help effectively.

Early childhood intervention services are challenged by the same factors that have undermined the effectiveness of general early childhood and family support services. We are having difficulties providing services promptly to all eligible children, as well as meeting the needs of those we already serve. Moreover, given the competing demands upon public funds, it is unlikely that early childhood intervention services will be given the additional money needed to provide comprehensive services to all eligible children and families. Instead, we need to be joining the general collective effort to rethink the ways in which we as societies and as service systems support all families of young children. This effort must be driven by the ultimate goal of achieving better outcomes for young people and families.

### **Towards a new paradigm of service**

- The early childhood intervention service system cannot resolve all its problems on its own – we must be part of efforts to reconfigure the general system of services to achieve better outcomes for all young children and families

- However, there are some steps that the early childhood intervention sector can take to put its own house in order
- We need to review the aims and purposes of early childhood intervention in the light of changing demands and circumstances, and new advances in the field: Exactly what outcomes are we trying to achieve? What strategies best achieve these outcomes?
- In doing so, we must engage parents as partners in determining the aims and forms of support that will best help them meet their children's needs
- We need to establish much closer partnerships with mainstream early childhood services, and work together towards a truly inclusive model of service delivery able to meet the needs of all children
- We also need to establish closer partnerships with other early childhood and family support services, and work together towards a truly comprehensive and coordinated system of support services for all families

### **Ways in early childhood intervention can contribute to service redevelopment**

As a service sector, the early childhood intervention system has many strengths, both individually (in the knowledge and skills of individual practitioners) and collectively (in our understanding of child development and vicissitudes, and in the philosophy and practices we have developed). These understandings, philosophies and practices could make a powerful contribution to the development of improved services and supports for children and families.

- We have developed a set of principles and practices on which more integrated and holistic services can be based – these include family-centred practice, use of natural learning opportunities, and transdisciplinary teamwork
- We could work with other services towards the universal adoption of family-centred practice as a common service philosophy for early childhood and family support services
- We could help parents and mainstream service providers learn how to make use of the natural learning opportunities that occur in the course of daily routines to build children's functional skills
- We could build upon our transdisciplinary teamwork experience to help build a system that ensures that all families get access to all the expertise they need in a coordinated fashion

To conclude, there is considerable scope for early childhood intervention services to play a leading role in the development of new and more effective services for all children and families.

### **References**

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