What do we need to know to work effectively with young children and families?
Towards a core curriculum

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There is common agreement among service providers and governments in many states and countries that our systems of child and family support services no longer meet the needs of young children and families as effectively as they once did. There is a growing understanding of the reasons why this is so and an emerging consensus that the services need to be reconfigured so as to meet the needs of young children and their families more effectively. To achieve better outcomes, it is proposed that services must become better integrated – that we need ‘joined up solutions for joined up problems’. For this to occur, the professionals and services involved need to share a common core of knowledge, skills and values – a ‘core curriculum’.

This presentation reports on the key findings of a national survey of the knowledge base and training needs of those working with young children and their families. A review of the literature review was conducted to identify what the core curriculum should comprise – this includes knowledge of the key principles of child development and the factors that effect the capacity of families to raise their children as they would like, and skills and values in how to work with children, families and communities, and how to work effectively with other professionals and services. The survey showed that no single profession had all the knowledge, skills and values needed to work effectively with young children and their families, although all professions had some of them. While knowledge can be learned at an undergraduate level through lectures, skills and values need to be taught on the job through supervision, mentoring, and ongoing training. The survey showed that supervision and mentoring were very inconsistently available across the professions working with young children and families, and that the ongoing training was conducted in professional ‘silos’ with few opportunities for multidisciplinary or cross-sectoral training.

The implications of these findings are discussed, and a new initiative to address the common training needs of those working with young children and their families is described. This consists of a series of CD ROM-based training modules for interdisciplinary groups. Finally, other actions still needed to address the training needs for the early childhood and family support sector are outlined.
Background

There are a number of reasons why the services that support young children and their families need to be reconfigured. In our work at the Centre for Community Child Health, we have identified four main reasons why we need to rethink the way we support families with young children:

- **Changes in families and family circumstances.** Over the past few decades, families have become more diverse in their structure and cultural background. As a result, there are more families with multiple needs, and, overall, parenting young children has become a more complex and more stressful business for many families.

- **Difficulties that services are having in meeting all the needs of all families.** As a result of changes in families and family circumstances (as well as other economic, demographic and social factors), early childhood and family support services are having increasing difficulty meeting the needs of all young children and their families effectively.

- **Concerns about poor developmental outcomes.** Across a wide range health and well-being indicators, the rates of poor developmental outcomes for adolescents and young adults have risen or are unacceptably high.

- **Recent findings from developmental research.** Evidence about the nature and importance of development during the early years continues to accumulate.

When considered together, these four factors present a compelling argument for reviewing the way that we provide services to young children and their families.

What form should this change take? We believe that there are three main ways in which change is needed: we need better integrated communities, better integrated services, and improved forms of dialogue between communities and services.

- **Better integrated communities.** As a result of the pervasive economic, social and demographic changes that have occurred over the past few decades, there has been a partial erosion of traditional family and neighbourhood support networks. This has left a greater proportion of parents of young children with relatively poor social support networks and therefore more vulnerable. The evidence strongly suggests that one way in which we could address this problem is by providing families of young children with multiple opportunities to meet other families of young children.

- **Better integrated services.** In the light of the difficulties that services have in meeting all the needs of all families effectively, the service system needs to become better integrated, so as to be able to meet the multiple needs of services in a more seamless way. We need to turn the system around so that it puts the customer first, tailoring our services to the needs and circumstances of families rather than the needs of professional and bureaucracies.

- **Improved forms of dialogue between communities and services.** For the service system to become more responsive to the emerging needs of young children and families, we need better ways of communicating, more constant feedback. This needs to occur at all levels, involving service providers in their dealings with
individual families, agencies with their client groups, and service systems with whole communities.

One of the conditions that need to be met for services to be better integrated is that the professionals / services involved should share a common core of knowledge, skills and values. This need for a core curriculum was the focus of a project recently undertaken by the Centre for Community Child Health on behalf of the Australian Council for Children and Parenting.

**ACCAP Capacity Building Project**

Aware of strong new evidence of the importance of the early years of childhood development for later learning and well-being, the Australian Council for Children and Parenting (ACCAP) became interested in establishing a program to maximise the knowledge and awareness among professionals and volunteers who work with or support young children. To lay the foundation for such a program, ACCAP contracted the Centre for Community Child Health to undertake a project that was designed to inform the development of a Capacity Building Program for professionals, practitioners and volunteers who work with or support young children (0-3 years) and their families across the nation.

The Project included the following components:

- a review of the literature on general training issues and on the essential core knowledge and skills needed by all workers in order to work effectively with families
- consultations with peak professional and training organisations
- a national survey of tertiary institutions involved in training professionals who work with young children and / or their families
- focus groups with representative early childhood practitioners
- an analysis of the relevant sections of the National Competencies framework

The identification of training needs for those working with children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds was subcontracted to the Victorian Co-operative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG). The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) was subcontracted to determine training needs of those working with young Indigenous children and their families.

The data collection phase of the project was conducted during 2002, and the final report completed in 2003.

**Results of literature review: The concept of a core curriculum**

Those who work with young children and families come from a wide variety of professions and backgrounds, ranging from volunteers and paraprofessionals to paediatricians and psychologists. Since they are all working in one way or another with
young children and families, there is a strong argument that they should all share the same core knowledge and skills (Thorp and McCollum, 1988, 1994).

A helpful framework for conceptualising the relationship between the core knowledge and skills needed by those who work with young children and their families, and the discipline-specific knowledge they also need, has been developed by Thorp and McCollum (1988). They suggest that, for each discipline or professional group, there are three levels of knowledge and skills

- **Level 1: General discipline-specific knowledge and skills**
  This is the knowledge and skills acquired by professionals during their basic undergraduate training. It usually covers the general discipline-specific knowledge (e.g. in nursing, social work) and strategies for working with people of all ages.

- **Level 2: Particular discipline-specific infancy knowledge and skills**
  When a person with a particular professional background specialises in working with young children and families, they then need to master the specific application of their discipline to this age group. Some disciplines do this through post-graduate courses (e.g. which is how doctors become paediatricians and nurses become child health nurses), but for many disciplines, there are no such courses.

- **Level 3: General infancy knowledge and skills**
  This is the core inter-disciplinary curriculum that all those working with young children and families need.

The general forms of training needed for each level is shown in the following table:

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<tr>
<th>TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS</th>
<th>FORM OF TRAINING</th>
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| **Level 1: General discipline-specific knowledge and skills** | - Membership of professional association  
| | - Ongoing discipline-specific professional development |
| **Level 2: Discipline-specific infancy knowledge and skills** | - Knowledge of discipline-specific aspects of child development and family functioning  
| | - Skills in delivering discipline-specific interventions to young children and families |
| **Level 3: General infancy knowledge and skills – core inter-disciplinary curriculum** | - Knowledge of early childhood development  
| | - Knowledge of factors that help or hinder healthy child development and family functioning  
| | - Skills in developing partnerships with parents  
| | - Skills in delivering family-centred services  
| | - Skills in interdisciplinary teamwork |

The overall framework is depicted in the following diagram:
A model for conceptualisation training of early childhood specialists from different disciplines
(from Thorp and McCollum, 1988)

As this model shows, the boundaries between professions are permeable to a greater or lesser extent, indicating that allied disciplines (eg. medicine and nursing, social work and psychology) often share some knowledge and skills. The model also shows that the relative size of the different knowledge levels may differ from discipline to discipline. Thus, the preservice training for some disciplines may only deal cursorily with the needs of infants and their families, while undergraduate courses in other disciplines may cover this phase of development more thoroughly, either as part of the core course or through electives.

In some cases, the distinction between the three knowledge levels is blurred or does not apply at all for those professionals whose core training is in early childhood – namely, early childhood educators and carers. However, even for this important group, there is no guarantee that they are taught all the knowledge and skills that are now needed to work effectively with young children and their families.
Content of the core curriculum

Various ways of categorising the knowledge and skills needed by those who work with young children and their families have been proposed. One such analysis (Munro, 2002) classifies the range of knowledge and skills used by professionals such as social workers into five major categories:

- **Formal knowledge.** This is the kind of knowledge provided by training courses, and covers practical knowledge of the laws, regulations, policies and procedures, as well as theoretical knowledge of child development, family functioning, and methods of intervention.

- **Practice wisdom.** This involves the personal theories (folk or ‘lay’ psychology) that everyone develops to make sense of their own and others’ behaviour, as well as social norms that govern people’s behaviour.

- **Emotional wisdom.** This is the emotional impact that work has on oneself and others.

- **Values.** All aspects of work take place in an ethical framework.

- **Reasoning skills.** This is the ability to reflect critically upon one’s practice and to reason from experience and knowledge.

For the purposes of the ACCAP Project, we collapsed these into three elements:

- **Knowledge** – of the key principles of child development and the factors that effect the capacity of families to raise their children as they would like
• **Skills** – in how to work with children, families and communities, and how to work effectively with other professionals and services

• **Values** – regarding children, families and communities

The literature review focused on identifying the key knowledge and skill areas that such a curriculum would cover, and identified nine knowledge areas and seven skills areas.

The **nine knowledge areas** proposed are as follows:

• Understanding the core principles of child development and the key developmental tasks faced by young children and their implications for practice

• Understanding the cumulative effects of multiple risk and protective factors and the developmental implications of the balance between them

• Understanding what conditions and experiences are known to have adverse effects on prenatal and early child development

• Understanding what conditions and experiences are known to have positive effects on prenatal and early child development

• Understanding the factors that support or undermine the capacity of families to rear young children adequately

• Understanding the features of the family’s immediate environment that are important for family functioning and young children’s development and well-being

• Understanding what features and qualities of communities help or hinder families in their capacity to raise young children adequately

• Recognising the core needs that all children and families have in common, and how to provide inclusive child and family services

• Understanding the particular backgrounds, experiences and needs of children and families in exceptional circumstances or with additional needs

In addition to the above knowledge areas, it is proposed that the core curriculum for those working with young children and families include the following **seven skill areas**:

• Understanding the features of effective evidence-based service delivery and being able to deliver such services

• Recognising the importance of coordinated service delivery to families and possessing the skills of interdisciplinary teamwork and interagency collaboration

• Possessing the skills to work effectively with infants and toddlers, and to help them master the key developmental tasks they face

• Knowing how to identify emerging child needs early, and how to address them

• Knowing how to manage children’s health needs, eating behaviours, and exercise needs appropriately

• Knowing how to provide environments and relationships that are safe for young children
Possessing the skills to work effectively with parents and families

The literature also indicated that effective practitioners not only need certain knowledge and skills, but also require certain values. The importance of values in the human services has been stressed by numerous experienced practitioners as well as by researchers (e.g., Bruder, 2000; Freud, 2001; McWilliam, 1993). For example, in discussing the nature of psychotherapy, Sophie Freud (2001) argues that it is

‘… not primarily a technical enterprise but, above all, a moral, socio-political and value-driven endeavour. …Therapy is made up of methods, theories, and values, and our methods and theories are only disguised values.’ (p. 335)

Thus, she suggests that our theories are simply social values that find expression through psychological theories.

Even if one does not fully accept this view, it is clear that values and attitudes are critical elements in effective service delivery. As McWilliam (1993) has stressed, effective work with families involves understanding one’s own values:

‘The field of early intervention is only beginning to acknowledge and understand how interventionists' personal beliefs about services and their own values about children's and families' needs may prevent them from understanding what families want and, thus, may reduce the effectiveness of services. Every family involved in early intervention services has a different set of values and beliefs that deviates to some extent from the values of the professionals who are responsible for providing services. Discovering what a family's values are is only part of the challenge in achieving quality. Perhaps the greatest challenge to professionals is understanding their own values.’

As Bruder (2000) points out in discussing family-centred practice, attitudes are the hardest things to teach and change:

‘Attitudes don't just permeate individuals, but they are embraced and reflected by agencies, organizations, communities, and constituents of communities such as those conducting research, training and service delivery. If one part of a system does not demonstrate family-centered attitudes, it is hard for the others in a system to override the damage this causes.’

McCollum and Catlett (1997) have developed a model showing the different types and intensity of learnings that are needed in order to acquire knowledge, skills and values (see next page). As shown in this graph, basic awareness and knowledge of an issue can be gained with the least effort and time, and may be acquired through reading or attending lectures. Mastering skills takes more time and effort, as well as a wider range of teaching strategies, including modelling, coaching and role playing. Acquiring attitudes and values takes the longest of all, and depends upon practical field experience, ongoing reflection and clinical supervision.
What is clear from McCollum and Catlett’s model is that pre-service training is usually most effective at transmitting knowledge, can also provide a grounding in basic skills, but may be least effective at transmitting the key attitudes and values that practitioners need to work with children and families. In order to consolidate and expand skills, and especially to acquire the necessary attitudes and values, professionals need ongoing professional development and appropriate supervision and support.

Results of literature review: *Training and professional development*

The literature on preservice training and professional development for professionals working with young children and their families was also reviewed. Whilst it was generally recognised that different training requirements exist for different professional groups, the
review identified a range of training needs common to all professionals working with young children and their families. These include

- training in communication and counselling skills,
- family-centred practice,
- cross-cultural competence,
- interdisciplinary teamwork,
- inter-agency collaboration,
- inclusive practices and use of natural learning environments.

The review also looked at what is known about effective pre-service and professional development training. Three main features of effective pre-service training were identified:

- interdisciplinary training in common knowledge and skill areas,
- using parents as trainers in how to work with parents and families, and
- basing training on adult learning principles.

The features of effective professional development and ongoing support programs include

- the availability of various forms of supervision and on-the-job training,
- cultivation of reflective practitioners and reflective work cultures, and
- the provision of training for managers (in staff support, team building and change management).

The National Competencies framework was also analysed. National Competencies have been developed in different service sectors to provide consistency in training across a range of jobs. They form part of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Each service sector has its own qualifications framework under the AQF. An analysis of these was undertaken based on relevant documents and interviews with senior managers from two organisations, one being a national industry training advisory body covering community services and health industries and the other responsible for the implementation of competencies in Victoria. The existing National Competencies (1999) were also mapped against the core knowledge and skill content areas identified in the literature review.

When compared with the training provided by universities (where there is no standardised undergraduate curriculum or training), the framework and idea behind the National Competencies of setting a national training standard has considerable merit. However, the content currently covered does not appear to be comprehensive enough to fully prepare workers to meet the needs of young children and families effectively. Content areas for which no competencies were listed included environmental conditions and experiences known to positively or adversely affect pre-natal and early child
development, and factors that support or undermine the ability of families to rear children adequately.

Discussion and conclusions

• The general idea of a core curriculum for early childhood workers was welcomed by all individuals and organisations consulted during the course of this Project. This model is already partly reflected in the National Competencies framework.

• The survey showed that no single profession had all the knowledge, skills and values needed to work effectively with young children and their families, although all professions had some

• There was agreement that knowledge of the core competencies and skills was patchy across the early childhood sector, and needed to become more consistent. Current knowledge of child development is more about stages of development rather than the factors that affect development.

• None of the individuals or organisations consulted had any quarrels with the core knowledge and skills as identified in the literature review. When the professionals and associations were asked to identify areas of knowledge and skills where additional training was needed, they were always consistent with the findings of the literature review

• There is a wide range of in-service training opportunities currently available to early childhood workers. However, these are not well integrated or easily accessible to all workers.

• Training tends to be done within professional or workforce ‘silos’, with much wasteful duplication as a result. There is clearly scope for a much greater degree of interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral training. This would have the dual advantage of being more economical, as well as helping ensure more of a shared knowledge base and philosophy among all those working with young children and their families.

• In-service training should be based on adult learning principles, which means acknowledging and building on people’s existing knowledge, skills and experience.

• The availability of supervision and mentoring were very inconsistently available across the professions working with young children and families. Some professional disciplines (eg. psychology and social work) and some services (eg. family support, mental health) have well-established induction procedures and supervisory practices, while others (eg. child care, early childhood education) have little or none. Where such on-the-job support and supervision is lacking, the consolidation of skills and values that are essential to effective practice are inevitably compromised.

• There is a need for greater variety in the types of training modalities used. To meet the needs of rural workers in particular, a range of training options is needed,
including more use of new technologies such as videoconferencing, interactive web technology, and CD ROM training packages.

• The literature review indicated that greater use could and should be made of parents as trainers of professionals in some courses and in-service programs. Although this point rarely arose in the consultations and focus groups, this is likely to be because the sector has had so little experience of parents in such a role. It is an option definitely worth exploring further.

• The pre-service training provided by universities is felt to be somewhat variable and ad hoc, and in many cases fails to equip people adequately for work with young children and families. To some extent, this is not the fault of the universities, since undergraduate courses cannot teach students all the skills they need to be effective practitioners – these must be learned or consolidated on the job. However, there is a consensus that universities could do a better job of equipping graduates with more relevant knowledge and skills.

• The respective roles of the Commonwealth and the states regarding pre-service and in-service training is unclear, and this contributes to the current fragmentation of training in the early childhood sector.

• Finally, there is a general sense that more and more parents themselves appear to be lacking the knowledge and confidence to raise their children effectively. In addition to considering how best to equip professionals with the knowledge and skills they need to work with young children and their families, we also need to consider how to raise the general public understanding of the needs of young children and how to support parents of young children more effectively.

Training modules

As a result of this survey, CCCH has developed a series of CD ROM-based training modules designed to address the common training needs of those working with young children and their families. Funded by the R.E. Ross Trust, these cover the following topics:

• Core module: Understanding child development and family functioning
• Module 1A: Introduction to family-centred practice
• Module 1B: Identifying and responding to child and family needs
• Module 2A: Community-centred practice
• Module 3A: What works: effective service delivery & collaboration
• Module 3B: Diversity and inclusive practices

Key features of the modules:
• Designed for an interdisciplinary group
• Integrated – designed as a complete set
• 3 hour modules
• CD ROM containing PowerPoint presentation, embedded video clips, background speaker notes, printable handouts and reading lists
• Train-the-trainer approach
• Integrated content across all modules

Training available from CCCH
• For details of the training modules, see the CCCH website – www.rch.org.au/ccch – and follow the links to Training, then The Early Years - Refocusing Community-based Services
• Alternatively, go straight to The Early Years page at http://www.rch.org.au/ccch/training/index.cfm?doc_id=7072
• The training calendar can be downloaded from http://www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/ccch/CCCH_Train_Calendar.pdf

Issues still to be addressed

• **We need to develop a comprehensive cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary approach to the provision of both pre-service and professional development training.** We need to explore common training needs across disciplines and agencies.

• **We need to integrate pre-service training programs on the one hand and professional development and support programs on the other.** These need to address the same core knowledge and skills areas.

• **We need to develop a more comprehensive approach to teaching specific core skills** such as family-centred practice, community-centred practice, core helping skills. The development of professional development modules based on the core curriculum identified in the ACCAP project is only a small start. The modules themselves are only for half-day sessions, and are introductions to the knowledge and skill areas, and are therefore no substitute for more intensive skill-based training (eg. Davis, Day and Bidmead, 2002).

• **We need to provide all professionals who work with young children and their families with opportunities for ongoing on-the-job supervision and mentoring.**

• **We need to continue to develop training materials using a greater range of training methodologies, particularly for the benefit of rural workers.**

• **Pre-service and professional development programs need to incorporate the key features of effective training** identified in the Capacity Building Project – including parents as trainers, and adult learning principles
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