

## COLAB POLICY PAPERS SERIES

### PAPER 4: What the Research Says: Improving Development and Learning Among Western Australian Children

#### Part 1: Summary of Papers 1-3

The broad questions this Policy Papers series address are:

- **What are the levels and dimensions of early childhood vulnerability in Western Australia?**
- **How, and how well is the State currently addressing and dealing with the existing level of early childhood vulnerability; and**
- **What can and should be done to diminish and eliminate early childhood vulnerability in the State?**

The first two questions were addressed in Papers 1-3 in the Series. Paper 1 described successes in improving child development over the last 50 years and Papers 2 and 3 described the current state of early childhood in Western Australia, looking first at the developmental status of children and then early childhood services.

This paper considers the increasingly clear picture research is painting about the needs of Western Australian families with young children and the best ways to support them. Paper 5 will present CoLab's model for an early childhood service system, taking into account contextual factors described in earlier papers and the research outlined in this paper.

Before describing the research that should inform future early childhood policy and service systems in Western Australia, it is important to note that research is telling a consistent and persuasive story about the importance of the early years to the future prosperity of each child and the nation. Decisions will need to be made in our community to overcome some of the pressing threats to the optimal early development of our children and to guarantee our future position as a prosperous State in a developed country.



## Part 2: What the research says: The circles of influence

Children develop within a hierarchy of relationships. This is depicted in Diagram 1, with the child at the centre, enveloped within layers of influence from the immediate family, service and community systems and the broader community. This is now widely accepted as a way of thinking about how we might optimise outcomes for children.

### DIAGRAM 1



This is broadly depicted in Diagram 1, with the child and immediate family at the centre, enveloped within layers of influence including Community (friends, neighbours and community services) and The Wider World, encapsulating community values, laws, the economy and so on.

### The Research – What Parents/Carers Do To Enhance Child Development

For each child, research is clear that early development is best served when parents and families provide:

- ▶ **Strong infant-mother attachment**
- ▶ **Adequate nutrition**
- ▶ **Language and cognitive stimulation**
- ▶ **Opportunities for physical development**
- ▶ **Healthful routines including adequate rest, sleep and play**

These aspects in turn rely on family and community circumstances that foster and support parents and family efforts to raise healthy, happy children. Research also tells us that despite the best intentions of parents and the general resilience of children, persistent and significant family disadvantage – wherever these problems are within the hierarchy of relationships - detracts from children's development. We know that direct investments of effort and resources to bolster the capacity of all families to provide children with their basic needs can prevent much of the damage that might otherwise be done by persistent disadvantage.

### The Research – How Families Enhance Children's Development

Research reinforces the role of families, especially parents and primary carers as the most important influence on children's development and learning. It points to the following factors that families do to optimise early development:

- ▶ **A stable and secure home environment;**
- ▶ **A warm and responsive emotional home setting;**
- ▶ **A home environment that minimises the risk of injuries; and**
- ▶ **The material resources to meet basic needs (including nutrition and healthcare).**



Families live within communities. These are the settings and contexts in which families are supported and protected, or conversely, can confront barriers to child-rearing. Communities that are more 'child-friendly' act like the suspension and shock absorbers on a car. They make a family's life journey more comfortable, offering opportunities for stable home lives, providing parents and children with opportunities to develop the capabilities needed for lifelong success. Communities also provide support when there are problems, making the road ahead less rocky and difficult to traverse.

### The Research – How Communities Enhance Children's Development

Research tells us child development is enhanced when communities provide:

- **A strong network of known and trusted adults to assist and support parents/families**
- **Culturally secure opportunities for socialisation – play, playgroups, neighbours etc**
- **Environments with accessible, safe and stimulating play spaces**
- **Opportunities to contribute to a positive social fabric and to feel a sense of connection and belonging**

Taken together, these are the components of the broader 'village' it takes to successfully raise children. These components are located in different silos of expertise within communities. For example, some aspects are within 'civil society', including not-for-profit groups and organisations, while others are the role of professionals in the private sector. Each community has its own patterns, preferences, histories and capacities.

Because the effectiveness of each 'village' is dependent on many diverse parts working seamlessly, research tells us it is problems with coordination rather than with individual parts of the system that are more often the cause of poor outcomes. While we know that family complexity and vulnerability are more likely to lead to poorer development in children, the diversity of ways in which this occurs and the requirement for increasingly sophisticated integration to respond as poverty increases, means many early year's systems lack the architecture to adequately respond to current demands. In no small part, this has been a product of the changes our society has undergone over the last 30 to 40 years. These include substantial population growth and changes to traditional family composition, size, age of parents and working patterns.

Too often, these changes have meant families most in need of the things that might help buffer and support their family life and their children's development access very little support, very late. This is often not a consequence of a lack of services, which in many cases are abundant. Rather, it happens because local early year's systems are often opaque for those who lack effective networks, a sound education, ready access to transport and other resources and supports.

This means the early year's system of a 'village' can remain poorly understood, sometimes with unclear entry points and purposes for those who might benefit most from it. It is often these families for whom the resources of the 'village' will only fully come into play when their problems become so acute that extreme levels of intervention like placement of children into care become inevitable to counter what have become extreme levels of adversity.

Governments can intervene strongly to support parents, families and communities. For the early years, it is usually the services that Government provides that offer the best supports.

## The Research – How Service Systems Can Enhance Children's Development

Policy Paper 3 in this series identified three factors that researchers consider important for service systems:

- **Access – services that are accessible to all families**
- **Reach – services that reach all families, including the most vulnerable**
- **Coordination - different elements of the early childhood services system working together coherently**

The evidence tells us that the 'prescription' for the best early years system is based on a principle of 'proportionate universalism'.

**Proportionate universalism** is the resourcing and delivering of universal services at a scale and intensity proportionate to the degree of need. Services are universally available to all families but service providers give 'proportionally' more service/s to families that need more support.

In Western Australia, the universal services available to all children and families are health services (e.g. child and maternal health and primary health services), education (early learning and care, kindergarten, school) and community services. From these 'universal' service platforms, there should also then be the capacity to deliver proportionate supports to families in need according to tailored plans.

An important part of the focus of these services and supports should be to stem the possible drift of families into distress. However, the focus should also be on ensuring family disadvantage doesn't translate into intergenerational disadvantage. The good news here is the evidence clearly shows this is both possible and makes good economic sense, repaying investments with outstanding financial returns for the economy.

Part of an optimal system is also an investment in building the capacity of civil society to contribute to better early years outcomes. There is good news here too. Parents who volunteer in their community not only contribute to the common good, they also accrue personal and family benefits because of their efforts. This virtuous cycle of giving and getting transforms communities because it builds better social capital, adds capacity to their 'village' and ensures the community itself plays a bigger role in shaping and steering their own local early years system. In turn, these benefits can translate into direct social and economic benefits, including providing pathways to employment if this is required.

Research does however, tell us clearly we need to aggressively build on the strengths of our existing systems, and we must especially improve how we attend to the needs of the one-in-five of our State's children who currently commence school with one or more areas of developmental vulnerability.

Why does this matter so much now? First, because developmental vulnerability is a large and preventable form of inequity and leads to a range of significant undesirable health and social



consequences. Second, because addressing the problem has proven economic benefits, with returns that increase with the passage of time. Third, because the nature of the global economy is in transition and the capacity to accommodate large numbers of people in low skilled occupations is rapidly disappearing. And fourth, the rapid aging of our population means we must act quickly to increase skills and productivity across the broader population if we are to retain a competitive economy that can afford to sustain its current mix of health and social services and supports.



In summary, researchers envisage a service system which is interconnected: where universal services can provide more support to children and families who need them and can make referrals seamlessly to targeted and tertiary services when this is required.

### What might change look like?

Research is perhaps best at telling us about problems and is often less clear about solutions. Notwithstanding this, the combination of coalface innovation and research does shed light on the kinds of change that will be desirable across Western Australia during

the coming decade. These include the capacity to identify different forms of family vulnerability much earlier, ideally during or even before pregnancy and to respond in more highly coordinated, targeted ways.

Another area of potential focus is to build capacity for greater community involvement in the design of early year's systems. While research can provide evidence about many things, it needs to be complemented by local knowledge about 'what will work and for whom'. These kinds of finely tuned navigational skills and understandings are highly contextual to communities and even to groups within communities, and they need to be recognised and valued.

While there are many other potential areas for change, investments in the people working at the coalface are clearly critical. Having a highly skilled workforce that is well supported is central to high quality, sustainable services and these in turn directly influence the capacity to deliver the best possible child and family outcomes. Added to this, the evidence from the field is clear; innovation in early year's systems invariably happens at the frontier of service delivery rather than the centre of organisations. To foster innovation, early year's systems within communities need to be encouraged and supported to adopt 'try, test and learn' improvement strategies as well as investing in the kinds of systemic quality improvement that have so far, been restricted to the internal areas of service silos. Added to this, new forms of accountability are needed to allow services and their staff more capacity for more creative responsiveness to the circumstances and families they work with.



## SUMMARY

Research has been clear in describing what parents, families and communities do that enhance child development. Further, it has described key principles that should underpin early childhood services – access, reach and coordination – and providing an approach to structuring the service system with the concept of proportionate universalism.

What it has **not** done is describe in detail what an 'evidence informed' early childhood system for Western Australia would be like. To do this, researchers need to work with policymakers and practitioners to synthesise the contextual factors described in earlier papers of this series with the research described in this paper.

Paper 5 in this CoLab Policy Paper series will provide our vision for an evidence-informed early childhood system in Western Australia, informed by evidence and taking into account the contextual factors relevant to the State.

As a joint initiative of the Minderoo Foundation and Telethon Kids Institute, CoLab (Collaborate for Kids) works with policy makers, practitioners, researchers and families to provide every child with the best foundation in life.

