



OFFICE FOR YOUTH POLICY ACTION TEAM (OfY A-Team)



RECOMMENDATIONS

Early Childhood Development and Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting

February – March 2007

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PREFACE

This is an extract from a paper that was prepared by the Office for Youth Policy Action Team (OfY A-Team) and is intended to be a report of the team's recommendations. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Office for Youth or individual state government agencies.

The Office for Youth has not edited or changed the content to ensure that the report is a true and accurate reflection of the OfY A-Team's ideas and recommendations.

OfY A-Teams bring together young employees from different agencies to work on specific policy issues. As part of a four and a half day structured program the group is encouraged to develop creative, considered recommendations for change.

The OfY A-Team program presents young employees with a professional development opportunity, promotes across-agency collaboration and places a youth perspective on policy issues.

The policy focus for this OfY A-Team was early childhood development and as part of the program they spent four hours interacting with Dr Fraser Mustard, Adelaide Thinker in Residence and read through background research. The group heard presentations from sector representatives and participated in an interactive panel discussion comprised of key South Australian figures.

The program culminated with a presentation to key decision-makers from across the community and a final report that has been provided to Dr Mustard to inform his recommendations on early childhood development to the Government of South Australia.

A full copy of the report is available from the South Australian Office for Youth.

The Office for Youth Policy Action Team (OfY A-Team) on early childhood development

Process

The OfY A-Team was a group of nine young people, selected from six government agencies and the University of South Australia. The A-Team was brought together in February 2007 to provide a youth lens on the issue of early childhood development during Dr Fraser Mustard's residence as an Adelaide Thinker in Residence.



The role of the A-Team was to develop a set of creative and practical recommendations in response to a focus question. The A-Team spent a brief amount of time (four and a half days) as a group, gaining background knowledge about early childhood development and developed their recommendations in response to the focus question:

“Within the context of integrated service delivery, how do we engage young women with children from disadvantaged backgrounds to ensure they benefit from the Children’s Centres?”

The “Children’s Centres” referred to in this question are Early Childhood Development and Parenting Centres and are an initiative of DECS, in collaboration with DoH and DFC. Twenty Children’s Centre locations have been announced to date, with some “up and running” and others in the process of being established. One of the original Children’s Centres is CaFE Enfield. These Centres are designed to provide integrated health, education, care and family support services, for children between birth to eight years, and their families (Government of South Australia, 2005).

The Office for Youth provided the A-Team with some background reading material, and the following program to assist in the development of their recommendations:

- Three interactive workshops with **Dr Fraser Mustard**, Adelaide Thinker in Residence



- Presentation of information from experts in the early childhood development field:
 - **Dr Tahnya Donaghy**, Director, Office for Youth
 - **Ms Brenda Kuhr**, Director, Adelaide Thinkers in Residence
 - **Ms Alexandra Diamond**, Project Catalyst, Adelaide Thinkers in Residence
 - **Ms Kathryn Jordan**, Project Catalyst, Adelaide Thinkers in Residence
 - **Ms Chris Christensen**, Manager Policy and Program Coordination, Early Childhood Services, Department for Education and Children's Services
 - **Ms Sherry Thompson**, Executive Director, Early Childhood Services, Department of Education and Children's Services
 - **Ms Marie Brennan**, Head of Education, University of SA

- A brief site visit to CaFE Enfield
- Attendance at "Panel in the Pub", addressing the social determinants of healthy early childhood, the way forward for South Australia:
 - Dr Fraser Mustard
 - Dr Ilona Kickbush
 - Professor Roger Thomas
 - Honourable Jay Weatherill MP
 - Professor Dorothy Scott

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- An interactive panel discussion with:
 - **Mr Alistair Dow**, Director, Early Childhood Development Strategy, Department of Education and Children's Services
 - **Ms Liz Wilson**, Director, Social Inclusion Strategy and Research, Department for Families and Communities
 - **Ms Tanya Smith**, Executive Director, Office of Executive Committee of Cabinet
 - **Ms Heather Parkes**, Director, Major Projects, Office of Health Reform, Department of Health

Much deliberation and careful consideration about the meaning of the focus question occurred. The A-Team paid close attention to the key phrases, “engage young women,” and “disadvantaged backgrounds.” Discussion also centered on the meaning of “integrated service delivery”.

After these discussions, the A-Team reached the conclusion that in order to engage young mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds; a universal approach would be required. The A-Team felt strongly that specific targeting of young women from *disadvantaged backgrounds* would be problematic for three key reasons.

Firstly, what is the definition of “disadvantaged” within this context? Does it relate only to socioeconomic status? Does it also encompass families who are confronted by barriers to service access for other reasons? For example, is the family who has to use public transport disadvantaged, because it is difficult or not possible for them to physically get to the services they require? Are pregnant mothers, who don't have knowledge about early childhood development and the services available, disadvantaged because they won't access services if they don't know that they exist?



The A-Team was also concerned that a response to the question which recommended specific initiatives or provisions in Centres in particular suburbs or areas typically referred to as “disadvantaged” could be contrary to evidence and advice provided by Dr Mustard. According to Dr Mustard, there have been instances in which children and parents in the wealthiest suburbs, presenting with circumstances that would not otherwise be referred to as “disadvantaged” have been, in fact, most in need of Early Childhood Development opportunities. Therefore any targeting of areas that are typically considered “disadvantaged” could mean that not all individuals in need of Early Childhood Development services and support would be captured. So we asked, what about the families who live outside these geographical locations who are in fact “disadvantaged,” due to socioeconomic or other reasons?



Finally, it was considered that “labelling” these individuals, or communities as “disadvantaged” and therefore targeting particular initiatives in response to disadvantage in some Centres and not others, would not work in favour of engaging and instilling confidence in the people at whom the services were aimed. In fact, it raised concern that such a label may increase the stigma attached to seeking help and services.

Ultimately, the A-Team had visions of creating a cultural shift towards Early Childhood Development, that this cultural shift in itself would minimise or ideally eliminate barriers to any young parent accessing a Children’s Centre. It was felt that any restriction on access or any stigma attached to services would hinder the realisation of this vision for current and future South Australians.

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It was with this vision in mind that the A-Team established five recommendations in response to the focus question. Recommendations one to four provide building blocks for the development of quality Children's Centres. The fifth recommendation focuses closely on engaging young parents with children so that they benefit from the Children's Centres.



Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Funding

Provide sufficient funding to develop and sustain Children’s Centres.

- 1.1 Liaise across professions with economists, academics, researchers and early years professionals to investigate the initial financial outlay required to establish integrated Early Childhood Development and Parenting Centres (Children’s Centres) and the future potential returns to be made.
- 1.2 Source funds for staffing, resources, transport, parental leave, education and advertising by working collaboratively within Local, State and Federal levels of Government and across both small and corporate business providers and child and parent advocacy organisations who are stakeholders within local communities.
- 1.3 Review awards (pay, working conditions, and educational requirements) for all staff employed in integrated services, including early childhood educators, to assist in attracting, retaining and motivating staff through the creation of an Integrated Services Award and Union.

Recommendation 2 – Education and Training

Provide universal education and training in Early Childhood Development to cultivate community understanding of the importance of the early years.

- 2.1 Establish a South Australian Institute of Human Development
- 2.2 Add Early Childhood Development components into high school curriculum.
- 2.3 Collaboratively offer health and early childhood development information and expertise to parent and families with young children from birth using a hands-on approach.
- 2.4 Provide education and training for the up-skilling of existing health care professionals and early childhood educators in the areas of neuroscience and Early Childhood Development.
- 2.5 Provide incentives and opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds (culturally and socially) and/or people who are bilingual (or interested in learning a second language) to train in early childhood development.

Recommendation 3 – Community Awareness

Create awareness within the community about the needs and services associated with Early Childhood Development.

- 3.1 Provide written and/or audiovisual resources and verbal information about early childhood services, tailored to specific localities.
- 3.2 Create a television and/or radio advertising campaign.
- 3.3 Engage and further educate prospective parents about the importance of Early Childhood Development and the available services prior to conception and/or during pregnancy.

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Recommendation 4 – Independent Authority

Establish an independent South Australian Early Childhood Development Council led by an Ombudsman for children and families to advocate for healthy Early Childhood Development

- 4.1 Ensure that provisions for early childhood health, development are established and maintained at a high level of quality.
- 4.2 Legislate to consult and involve the established Council in all levels of local, state and federal government decision making.

Recommendation 5 – Community Participation

Facilitate community participation in the development, implementation and running of Children's Centres

5.1 Cultural Inclusion

- 5.1.1 Provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services and resources within the Centres.
- 5.1.2 Employ bilingual staff in Children's Centres.

5.2 Access to Centres

- 5.2.1 Provide transport to and from Centres and outreach services.
- 5.2.2 Ensure that service provisions are "user friendly".
- 5.2.3 Review parental leave options and policies to allow parents more time to access Children's Centres and form attachments with their children.

5.3 Community Engagement

- 5.3.1 Provide social opportunities through the Centres to engage the community
- 5.3.2 Engage parents in mentoring programs with other parents and grandparents
- 5.3.3 Engage peer workers and volunteers with parents and children within Children's Centres
- 5.3.4 Provide incentives for males to work in Children's Centres to assist in engaging fathers
- 5.3.5 Initiate parent engagement with Children's Centres through activities such as clothes swap days and food days

5.4 Best Practice

- 5.4.1 Reduce repetition of information between services within Centres e.g. a shared network or database system
- 5.4.2 Ensure safety within Children's Centres

5.5 Facilitate community participation in the development, implementation and running of Children's Centres

- 5.5.1 Hold functions as opportunities for people to voice their opinions as well as accessing people within the community context
- 5.5.2 Create opportunities for members of the community to hold key positions within the Centres in relation to the planning, implementation and running and seek their constant contributions
- 5.5.3 Needs assessments designed and answered by members of the community
- 5.5.4 Decision making and action in partnership with members of the community
- 5.5.5 Constant evaluation of mechanisms facilitating community input

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Conclusion

This report aims to provide some pieces of the puzzle of the early childhood picture. The only question now, is “how do they fit together?”



The A-Team has demonstrated that Early Childhood Development is an issue relevant to every South Australian, regardless of their background. The children of South Australia are *everybody's* responsibility.

As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child, but what happens when the village consists of only a few people? What happens if there is no partner to “share the load”, or no mother to turn to for advice? The A-Team believes that it should be the responsibility of every South Australian, to ensure that the village surrounding each South Australian child is adequate to support parents to raise their children.

This report is not viewed as an opportunity to simply “hand over” the A-Team’s recommendations, but as an opportunity for the A-Team to begin a process of ongoing engagement with people across the South Australian community in relation to this important public policy issue. The combination of the A-Team’s “vested interest” in, and passion for advocacy for Early Childhood Development, has led us to seek partnership with others in the community. It is hoped that these partnerships will ensure that the A-Team’s ideas and recommendations are further explored and actioned.

The key champions identified within the report are departments, agencies or organisations that the A-Team believes will be able to take a leading role in actioning the recommendations. They are by no means an exhaustive list, purely

ideas about where to start. The A-Team hopes to be perceived as valuable resources and eager contributors to South Australian development in this area.

Putting all the pieces of the early childhood puzzle together in order to form the right picture for South Australia is a large and challenging task, but it is by no means unachievable. In the words of Margaret Mead, we should *“never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed it’s the only thing that ever has”*.

The more the A-Team have thought about this issue, the more we have realised that this topic is intertwined with every key social issue South Australia currently faces. And so, borrowing from Mead’s wisdom, we should *“never doubt that a group of carefully planned and willingly supported Children’s Centres can change the state.”* In fact, we should not underestimate the power that getting the early childhood picture right has to change the *world* for all South Australians.

We look forward to working with you to change the world!

Acknowledgments

The A-Team would like to thank and acknowledge those who worked hard with us to ensure we could complete this task in such a short period of time.

Firstly a huge thanks to our fantastic facilitator **Mia Handshin** for her warmth, enthusiasm, organisation and facilitation skills. We couldn't have done it without you! If you need a brilliant facilitator, we couldn't recommend her highly enough, you can find out more at: www.manaofspeaking.com.au.

We would also like to acknowledge the contribution of **Lauren Manser**. Lauren is a second year student in Early Childhood Education at the University of SA, and attended the first few sessions with the A-Team, but unfortunately was unable to continue. Lauren brought to our initial discussions a teenage perspective, first hand experience in child care and of disadvantage, and a theoretical knowledge of Early Childhood Development. The A-Team greatly valued Lauren's contribution to the A-Team.

Thanks also to the Thinkers in Residence Program, especially **Dr Fraser Mustard** for his time, thoughtful responses, and belief in the philosophy of the A-Team. We all learned a lot from you and hope to "keep the momentum going" on early childhood issues once you return to Canada.

Special thanks to **Deborah Pontifex** from Adelaide Thinkers in Residence for being a great co-facilitator, and making sure we got as much out of our workshops with Dr Mustard as possible.

We would like to acknowledge the Office for Youth and the **Director, Dr Tahnya Donaghy** for the opportunity to participate in the program. Thanks to **Kathy Eleutheriou** from the Office for Youth who organised everything for us from cab charges to morning tea. Thanks for all your support Kathy!