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Families at the Centre

What do low income families say about care and education for their young children?

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Families at the Centre Policy Snapshot



Summary

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a major focus of public policy, public debate and social expenditure in Australia and internationally. The benefits of participation in high quality ECEC are especially strong for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite a surge of interest in early childhood education, there is little information about how early childhood services operate at the local level, how parents make decisions about the use of ECEC services, how they negotiate local markets and how they understand the subsidies and rules that govern access to ECEC.

This policy snapshot presents findings from *Families at the Centre*, a research project funded by the Australian Research Council and conducted by researchers from the Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW, with the support of Mission Australia, Early Childhood Australia, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and the Gowrie services based in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. *Families at the Centre* was designed to deepen understanding of how ECEC fits into the lives of low-income families and to explore how well services meet the needs and reflect the values of low-income families. The researchers also wanted to get a better understanding of how families manage the subsidies and rules that govern access to the various forms of ECEC. The findings are particularly timely given the debate generated by the Productivity Commission inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning.

Findings

Recognise family needs for security and safety. When it comes to early childhood services, we learned from parents in our study that safety and security can take precedence over access to formal education and care. Once families feel that their needs for safety from violence, secure housing and financial stability are being met, they can focus on ECEC. If all children are to benefit from early learning, then policy needs to enable services to stay connected with families through difficult times, or to reconnect with families quickly.

Keep ECEC affordable for all families. Families told us that it is essential that ECEC is affordable. If families cannot afford the fees, they cannot use the services. Subsidies from government make ECEC accessible for families who would not otherwise afford it and these subsidies need to be available for families who are getting themselves into a work ready position as well as those that are already working. Parents talked about instability in their working lives, and valued the fact that they could continue using ECEC services when they were out of work, when their hours were unpredictable, or when they were participating in training or searching for new jobs. The Productivity Commission proposal that ECEC subsidies be limited to families where the sole parent or both parents are working, training or studying at least 24 hours per fortnight does not recognise this flux in the lives of low income families. Further, if the process of claiming subsidies is too complex, families will make mistakes with costly consequences. Services need to explain and guide families through the subsidy system.

Listen to families. The families in our study stressed the importance of professional listening and responsiveness. Attention to children's learning is not enough: professional discourse can alienate families and stymie the flow of dialogue. Families do not want a one-way flow of information. They want services to listen to them and respect them. They want to communicate their expertise about their own children.

It's not just 'my child'. All families want what is best for their children, but many also believe that achieving the best for their children can involve networks of families or whole communities. Instead of focusing solely on their own children, sometimes families want to work together, share ideas, give each other courage and support, and collectively secure the resources they need. But developing trusted networks can be difficult and finding the right resources can be overwhelming. Policy can enable skilled educators within adaptable services to help families build supportive networks.

Implications

The key findings from *Families at the Centre* point to a need for flexible, responsive services that have wide horizons and are not narrowly focused on the education and care of children. Holistic, integrated or wrap around services offer much broader resources than stand-alone care and education services. In this, they are a close match to the service and resource needs expressed by many of the most disadvantaged families in the study.



Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a major focus of public policy, public debate and social expenditure in Australia and internationally. The provision of ECEC addresses multiple policy goals. It can boost children's development and improve school readiness as well as support parental labour force participation and help to reduce or alleviate family poverty. Ensuring access to high quality ECEC for all children is 'smart social policy, smart economic policy and smart health policy' (Battle and Torjman, 2002, p1). The benefits of sustained participation in high quality ECEC are especially strong for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Sylva et al., 2012; Ruhm & Waldfogel, 2012; Organisation for Economic Co-ordination and Development, 2011). The Effective Provision of Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE), a longitudinal study conducted in the UK, shows the positive effects of quality ECEC on children's intellectual and social/behavioural development. As in health care, the greatest gains accrue when universal services are boosted by additional support proportionate to the level of disadvantage experienced in particular communities (Marmot, 2010).

It is important to think broadly and holistically about ECEC. A narrow focus on parental labour force participation risks ignoring the substantial benefits to children in the 'here and now' as well as underestimating the wider benefits and long-term contribution of ECEC to the economy (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2014). The potential benefits of increased female workforce participation have been calculated at approximately $6 billion, the gains from raising quality across the board and ensuring that more children receive high quality ECEC are estimated at up to $10.3 billion and the benefits of increased participation by children from disadvantaged backgrounds could be as much as $13.3 billion. Thus, over time, the gains from supporting quality provision and extending participation to children from disadvantaged backgrounds would significantly exceed the gains from increased female workforce participation (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2014, p4).

Despite a surge of interest in early childhood education and care, there is little information about how early childhood services operate at the local level, how parents make decisions about the use of ECEC services, how they negotiate local markets and how they understand the subsidies and rules that govern access to ECEC. Australian scholars have mapped changing patterns of work and care (Pocock, 2003), new family structures (Baxter 2013), and shifts in childcare policy at the national level (Brennan & Adamson, 2012; Craig, Mullan & Blaxland, 2010; Elliott, 2006). Bodies such as the Productivity Commission and the Australian Bureau of Statistics have produced extensive and valuable information about aggregate patterns of childcare usage and labour force participation (SCRGSP, 2014; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). There is a small body of work that has families as a starting point (Taylor & Allen, 2013; Bowes et al., 2003;2004; Bowes et al. 2009; Boyd 2013; 2014; Noble, 2007; and Harris &Tinning, 2012). In general, however, policy makers and service providers have a fairly thin evidence base about how families make decisions about employment versus parental care, formal care or informal care, and how parents negotiate the complex rules of eligibility for different types of benefits.
This paper presents findings from *Families at the Centre*, a research project funded by the Australian Research Council and conducted by researchers from the Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW, with the support of Mission Australia, Early Childhood Australia, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and the Gowrie services based in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia.[1]

The findings are particularly timely given the debate generated by the Productivity Commission inquiry into Childcare and

[1] LP100200297, Families at the Centre:
Negotiating Australia's Mixed Market in Early Childhood Education and Care.
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Early Childhood Learning. In its draft report, the Commission recommended restricting mainstream Commonwealth subsidies to children whose parents are working, looking for work, training, or studying for at least 24 hours per fortnight, with limited exceptions (Productivity Commission, 2014, p536). If adopted, the recommendations of the Commission would have major consequences for approximately fifty percent of the children and families in this study and tens of thousands of others whose circumstances and life experiences are similar. They could add to the 160,000 children aged 0-5 whose families are in the lowest income bracket[2] that currently do not attend any form of child care (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2014, p3).

About The Research

Families at the Centre was designed to deepen understanding of how ECEC fits into the lives of low-income families with children below school age. The research team wanted to explore how well services meet the needs and reflect the values of low-income families. We also wanted to get a better understanding of how families manage the subsidies and rules that govern access to the various forms of ECEC like preschool, long day care, family day care and occasional care. We approached these questions through a mixed method study, weaving together analysis of statistical data, and national and international policy analysis with findings from qualitative interviews with more than 130 parents across four Australian States. We interviewed parents and service providers in six locations, including inner city and outer-ring suburbs and regional areas. Our partners and local service providers helped us to gain an understanding of each local area and how we might best connect with families underserved by the ECEC system.

We found our interviewees by visiting mobile services, parent support services and playgroups. We made a special effort to include families who were not using services by 'snowballing' out from a variety of services and providers. Approximately 70% of the parents/carers we interviewed were Anglo-Australian, 8% identified as Aboriginal, and 22% were first generation migrants (these families were mainly from west and north Africa but some were from Arabic and South East Asian countries). About 40% of our interviewees were sole parents. Most of those whom we interviewed were mothers, but we also interviewed five fathers and several kin-carers. Thirty-four percent of families were not using formal ECEC when we interviewed them, although most had previously done so.

Through the interviews we sought deep, contextualised understandings of how parents make decisions about child rearing, the resources they require for their children in their early years and their thinking about the place of ECEC in their lives. The interviews addressed parents' care and education priorities, their aspirations for their children, information sources and views of local children's services; their use of grandparent and kin care; their knowledge of, and calculations about, state and federal government subsidies and family decision making processes.

Importantly, we began our interviews by asking parents to describe their children and tell us a bit about what they liked, what they were good at and what they needed. This way of opening the discussion acknowledged parents as experts about their children and set the stage for us to convey appreciation for, and acceptance of, the multitude of decisions parents make in the interests of their children and families.

One of the primary purposes of our study was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to low-income and disadvantaged families having lower levels of usage of ECEC services than other families. While the high cost of ECEC undoubtedly constitutes a barrier for some families, the parents we spoke to also placed emphasis on their need to deal with pressing life circumstances such as housing insecurity or lack of employment. ECEC was highly valued, but it had to be prioritised alongside other needs that were often immediate and pressing. Many of the families had very complex lives; they were juggling multiple responsibilities and pressures; ECEC had to take its place on the queue of family priorities. Four key themes emerged from our interviews:

1. Families struggling to meet their basic needs for secure housing, freedom from violence and adequate minimum income often find mainstream ECEC services hard to use and beyond their reach financially and logistically.

2. Free or low-cost services are essential to ensure access for low income families, regardless of their engagement in employment, training or education.

3. Parents want to have a say in the education and care their children receive and have their expertise about their children recognised and incorporated into how their children are educated. Inflexible approaches to pedagogy and service delivery are particularly off-putting to families who struggle to have their views heard and needs met in other aspects of their lives.

4. Many parents have a strong sense of communal interdependence. Their efforts to develop or maintain social capital and a broader social vision are sometimes confounded by systems and subsidy structures that constitute families and children as individual 'consumers'.

We elaborate on these findings below, contextualising our findings within the broader literature on ECEC.

Security and Safety

Secure, affordable housing, freedom from violence and access to decent employment are the foundations for secure family life (Robinson et al, 2008; Baxter et al, 2012; Hulse and Sharam, 2013; Sharam & Hulse, 2014; Mimura, 2008; Mitchell, 2011). For a significant number of the families in our study, these needs were not being met. Economic adversity, domestic violence, inadequate and impermanent housing, and lack of transport compromised their capacity to use services. The fact that these families did not access or engage with ECEC was not due to a lack of interest in their children's education but reflected their need to focus first on family stability and safety. Amanda is one such parent. Her story captures some of the complexities of raising young children in precarious circumstances.

Amanda[3]

Amanda is a whip thin, energetic young mother. She had prepared play dough, cutters and vegetable snacks for her children before we arrived for the interview. It was quickly apparent that the bag of playthings we had brought to entertain children was redundant. Amanda's children (aged eight, two and one) were perched on every available centimeter of her legs, eagerly listening as she described their characteristics and idiosyncrasies in response to our opening question. Amanda then directed them to the climbing frame. Without missing a beat, she began telling us the next thing she felt we needed to know to better understand her choices for her children. She gave us a description of the mutual benefits she and her children derived from sharing a living space with her father.

[2] Family income less than $1000 per week or single parent incomes less than $600 per week.

[3] Throughout, we have used pseudonyms chosen by our research participants.



She told us:
"I know that my dad thrives on looking after the kids. I'm a little bit worried what's going to happen when we move out … he's going to be lost without them, he helps me so much."

Amanda was completing a nursing qualification while raising three young children. Her children needed care while she went to classes and to the library to use the internet. Amanda and her children lived with her father in an ageing caravan that had been extended with tarpaulins and was insulated against the cold by carpets and blankets. When they had been evicted from their rental property the previous year, their options had been very limited. Affordable properties on the private rental market were in scarce supply and a good 'rental track record' was required to secure a tenancy. The Department of Housing had long waiting lists. So Amanda and her children moved in with her father.

Many aspects of this arrangement worked well. Amanda and her Dad combined their incomes to afford better food and petrol. Her father looked after the children allowing her time to study and enriching the children's lives through close contact with their grandfather. She and her father looked out for each other and were constants in each other's lives. Amanda worried that, without the children around, her father would slip into depression. On the downside, the caravan was cramped, cold and dark - a difficult arrangement for a family with three children under eight. The toilet and shower block was a long way away and not always clean. Her middle child was slow to potty train.

Amanda's main goal was to complete her course and gain employment so she could afford secure accommodation for her children and her father. Due to the high cost of petrol, she went to college by public transport. Getting two children to preschool or long day care was beyond her and her father's combined resources. However, she participated in a supported playgroup that came into the caravan park on a regular basis. The whole family went along. Amanda explained that her children loved having lots of different toys to play with and that they particularly enjoyed the semi-structured story time. Observing the playgroup facilitators, she believed, gave her Dad ideas about things to do with the kids. In short, Amanda accessed services that came to her, but she had very little time or opportunity to take her children to services outside her immediate environment.

Amanda's way of thinking about her children's material and emotional security was echoed by many participants in *Families at the Centre*. Her precarious living situation is shared by tens of thousands of families across Australia. According to the most recent Census, for example, 17,845 children under the age of 12 years are homeless or live in situations which do not meet minimum community standards. The ABS definition of homelessness includes people sleeping rough or living in cars, people moving between temporary and/or supported accommodation, people living permanently in single rooms in private boarding houses or in caravans that do not have a private bathroom or kitchen, and lack security of tenure, and severe overcrowding. Amanda's immediate problem at the time of interview – her lack of secure, appropriate accommodation – resulted from economic adversity combined with shortages in public housing and a rental sector that fails to deliver affordable housing. In the past, she had experienced other factors that can propel a family with young children into homelessness. Domestic violence had forced her to move on from relatively stable living arrangements. A significant proportion of clients who present to homelessness services (28% of the 244,000 clients in the 2012-

2013 Specialist Homelessness Services Collection) do so in a family group. Nearly a quarter of the clients who present to services do so for the main reason of escaping family and domestic violence (AIHW, 2013, pp.5,19).

A significant number of families in the study who were not using ECEC services faced housing instability and/or the threat of violence within their homes or immediate communities. Others were daunted and constrained by an accumulation of small financial debts or did not have transport to get to services. Many families had cars but could not necessarily afford petrol. All were intent on changing these circumstances as an immediate priority. While the cost of ECEC was a significant issue for some families, there were logistical barriers to using care that went beyond the question of fees. For these families – first things came first – security came before education. They took up education opportunities where they could, but prioritised getting into more secure circumstances.
Like all parents of young children, families in precarious circumstances often look out for affordable activities for their young children, preferably activities that contribute to children's learning and development (Grealy et al., 2012; Berthelsen et al., 2012; Chaudry et al., 2011). ECEC services, particularly mobile services, can be a very welcome 'soft entry point' to early years education and indeed a point where families can access referral and support services while children engage in play and learning (Moore & Skinner, 2010; Cortis, Katz & Patulny, 2009; Moore et al., 2009). When families experiencing insecure and difficult living conditions are able to use education services for children, these services can be an invaluable source of stability for children in unstable times and can be a conduit to specialist services for children (Hulse et al., 2013).

Most of the participants in *Families at the Centre*, including many not using ECEC when we interviewed them, had used ECEC services at some point. These families all acknowledged that ECEC was important for their children. Most had disengaged because of issues that threatened their security – for example, severe economic adversity, homelessness, drug and alcohol issues in their family, family break up and/or mental illness. Once families slid into a precarious situation, mainstream ECEC became too difficult to access.

Families who do not use ECEC services are sometimes portrayed as valuing early education less than other families or as being 'hard to reach'. Amanda and others in our study did not lack interest in ECEC, did not value it less than other families and were not especially hard to reach. However, they needed to resolve economic pressures and ensure safety and stability for themselves and their children.

Families from disadvantaged contexts were able to thrive when supported to articulate their priorities and find resources to meet their basic everyday needs. Complex family and community negotiations and accommodations are a feature of decision-making in under-resourced families, in part because parents are sometimes reliant on others to meet those basic needs (Chaudry et al., 2011; Leseman, 2002; Hand, 2005). Their complex negotiations were underpinned by a view of child rearing, children's education and parental work as interconnected. When there were significant other demands on the family income and energies, under-resourced families were ambivalent about spending scarce economic resources on ECEC services. However, when supported to articulate and meet their broader family needs, having children in quality ECEC became a priority. Many then faced the hurdles of the subsidy system.

Key message: Recognise family needs for security and safety.

Costs and subsidies

Families seeking to use ECEC services face a confusing array of eligibility requirements, subsidies and application processes for different types of early care and education. Those considering placing their child into an early learning and care setting for the first time have to weigh up many cost and quality considerations: Will my child be okay? Will the service fit in with my work or study needs? Can we find a service we like and can get to? And, crucially, how much will it cost?

The cost of ECEC is a pressing concern. Across Australia, fees for ECEC range widely. In some jurisdictions (Western Australia, Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory) pre-school is free for children in the year before school, though some services ask for a voluntary contribution. For children in other states, and those who are below preschool age, parents face a range of costs depending on the family's income, age of child(ren) and type of care used. Australian research shows that family income plays a crucial role in mediating access to child care, with children aged 0 to 14 years from high income families being twice as likely (52%) to access child care (formal or informal) than children from low income families (25%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011, Tables 6 & 7). Data from the Australian Early Development Index also shows that participation in high quality early childhood education is skewed toward more advantaged families (AIHW, 2012). Subsidies can be effective in reducing the fees faced by families; however, in line with other Australian research (Baxter & Hand, 2013), our research showed that there are many factors in addition to costs that impact children's access to ECEC. Free or low-cost provision is vital for low-income families and, where subsidies are provided, they need to be simple and transparent if they are not to become further barriers to access.

Danh

Danh is intelligent and resourceful. In his time, he has negotiated extremely daunting and complex situations, such as migrating with his family from Vietnam and finding his way to a new life in Australia. But child care subsidies very nearly stumped him.

Danh and his wife Yen, their son Quang and new baby daughter, Mai, set up house in a suburb in the inner city. Yen cares for the children and Danh is studying so he can get a good job and support the family. While his enrollment is part-time at 20 hours a fortnight, his rudimentary English means that he spends many hours completing assignments and preparing for his classes. When Quang turned three, Danh and Yen wanted him to attend an early education program in preparation for school. They were worried about how to afford preschool education on their income so Danh began to look for information about the kinds of government support that might be available to help with fees. But he found it hard to find the right organisation and the right contact person.

"The thing is, when we went to the council, they will give us flyers. If I ask something about it, they will say that it's better to contact this number. Then sometimes it's just they will take long hours, a long time, to reach [on the phone]. We had many questions about it and we just got confused. Sometimes I decided okay, this is wasting my time…we just pay."

After a lengthy process in which he was always referred onto someone else, Danh thought that finding out about subsidies might not be worth the effort. However, he and his wife persisted. Eventually, Yen enrolled Quang in a long day care centre and Danh applied for Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate.



It was many months before the application was approved: *"On the day I put in the application form, then I think I didn't fill out the child care benefit number. They say they are processing everything and they take months. So I had to pay the whole fee for months, so I was so worried. $86 per day. I said, 'I don't have that much.' I just have about $100 – a bit more, $150, and I pay more than half of my money…I think because I forgot to write his reference number, but the problem is they didn't tell me. They [the long day care centre] checked my form. They didn't ask, 'Why you don't have it? Every child has it.' I'm so scared every single day. They should tell me that you are missing the reference number."*

Danh did not write his son's Centrelink number, his Customer Reference Number, on the application form and he did not appreciate the significance of this oversight. The long day care centre did not notice and it took Centrelink some months to contact him about it. In the meantime, Danh paid more than half his small wage on long day care fees, leaving little over for other expenses.

Like Danh and Yen, many families worry they may not be able to afford ECEC for their children under the current system. Sixty-two percent of families in a survey by Mission Australia (2014) said that low cost was either extremely or very important when they were choosing a child care centre. The survey results showed that cost was of particular concern for families in disadvantaged socio-economic areas (Mission Australia, 2014). This is not surprising, in 2013, the average cost of long day care, if a child were attending for 50 hours in a week, was $364, for family day care, $339. This is similar to the cost of housing for most families (ABS, 2013). For some, difficulties with the cost of child care can last for years. The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey found that 46% of households said that they had problems with the cost of child care in 2007 (Wilkins & Warren, 2012). A year later in 2008, 55% of these households said cost was still a problem and 34% were continuing to have difficulties in 2009. In recognition of the importance of affordable ECEC, the Australian Government and State and Territory Governments subsidise costs for families. On the whole, State and Territory Governments focus on preschool costs, while the Australian Government reduces the cost of other services, like long day care, family day care and occasional care, with the payment of Child Care Benefit, Child Care Rebate, and JET Child Care.

The Productivity Commission (2014) recommended that eligibility for ECEC subsidies be tied to a work-test, so that to receive assistance with the cost of ECEC both parents would have to be working, looking for work, training, or studying for at least 24 hours per fortnight, with limited exceptions. These recommendations disadvantage families in precarious work who may be moving above and below the threshold. It also excludes people who cannot participate in work, training or study because of complex circumstances, but who remain outside the targeted groups. If implemented, this recommendation would exclude Danh's family and a large proportion of the families in this study, as well as tens of thousands of other Australian children (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2014). There were many more families in the study (over fifty percent) who move in and out of precarious work and who would meet the threshold at some times but not at other times. The recommendation does not recognise the increasing precariousness of low paid work (ABS, 2009).

In the Mission Australia (2014) study, four-fifths of families said they would have to change their work, study or ECEC arrangements if government subsidies were reduced. Danh and Yen would not meet the work-test, and so, under the proposed recommendations, their children could not access any ECEC subsidy. Paying full fees for their son's long day care was

incredibly difficult, even for just a few months. Without the prospect of subsidies to assist them, Danh and Yen could not have continued. They would have had to make other choices, possibly removing Quang from ECEC. Our analysis suggests that all children should have access to quality ECEC, with additional services and supports for families in disadvantaged circumstances.

Furthermore, the process of accessing subsidies needs to be supported. Researchers in *Families at the Centre* asked families if they knew about and received any government subsidies to help with childcare expenses. We also asked them to tell us their experiences in accessing these payments. Most families who had successfully claimed Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate received the payments regularly and without much further complexity. The process of making a claim, however, was fraught with difficulty for many families. In the first place, families had to find out that subsidies might be available; then they had to discover which subsidies they might be entitled to and how to make a claim. These processes could be confusing and frustrating. Several families had problems with the claims process and, like Danh, received no assistance with their fees for some months. For low-income families, it was especially difficult to pay full fees during this time. One mother was not advised about Child Care Benefit or Child Care Rebate and accumulated a debt to her long day care centre over a whole year. Similar situations have been identified in international research (Adams & Matthews, 2013).
Other families were assisted by their service provider to make a claim for Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate. These families described the process as easy and uncomplicated. In these instances, the service provider advised families that they might be eligible for government assistance, helped them to complete the application forms correctly and to submit them in a timely manner and answered families' many questions.

Key message: Keep ECEC affordable for all families.

Listening to families and valuing their knowledge

All parents want the best for their children but their views about what is best do not always coincide with the views of professionals. In respect of formal early childhood services, parents want experienced, caring, qualified staff; they want their children to feel happy and secure; and they want an environment that is child-centred (Graces & Bowes, 2010; Boyd, Tayler & Thorpe, 2010). However, many families in our study did not feel services were providing the kind of education their children needed, and did not feel that service providers were open to their views about education. Some even chose not to invest scarce funds in ECEC because they did not feel it was value for money in terms of education.
The issues Billie raised are complex and require responses from educators who have a deep understanding of how children's learning is shaped by a number of factors in their environments. These influences on learning include parental beliefs about learning and understandings of the child's future schooling contexts. It is critical that the education offered to children and families is responsive to these contextual features of children's learning environments.

Billie

Billie brings all the dynamism of her previous life in the circus to juggling life with five young children. She knows what they need to succeed at school and is determined that they learn the importance of patience and discipline. She has spent time teaching her children the alphabet, reading, writing and numbers so that they are ready to learn when they begin school. Billie thought that long day care would be a good place for her children to pick up these skills and socialise with other youngsters. She was taken aback by how little attention was given to developing these abilities.

She told us that she had expected: *"Some flash cards. Sitting time. Little things like that. Patience – because I reckon at that age you can teach them patience. It makes things a little bit easier. Of course every kid has trouble with patience. Songs, teaching the ABC in song. Little things like that they wouldn't do. The kids would come and they'd just sit around. Or they'd be outside and then the teachers, the workers there, would end up just gasbagging about their weekends.*
To me, [childcare] is not just to give parents a break - they've got to teach them something there."

Fed up, Billie took a stand. *'It was only after I had a fight with them, they started bringing out flash cards and getting the kids all sitting for reading time … The kids started to learn more there, so that was not bad then.'* But then Billie had to move house and faced the same frustrations all over again when two of her children started at a new long day care centre. After struggling with high costs for a few months, she pulled them out.

I don't see the point in wasting the money when they don't do enough with them. As I said, you're just paying for the kid to play somewhere else. You could take them to a park and save that money.

Billie values early education highly – so highly that she felt her children would learn more outside a formal setting. Billie knows from her own experience at school that success as a student requires a particular demeanour and she considers early literacy and numeracy to be very important. She did not see this commitment to learning in the settings she had used. If the educators had been teaching these skills through play they did not communicate it to Billie. In fact she felt that that when she raised the issue with educators she was treated with disrespect. She felt that she was seen as 'complaining' rather than respected as a mother engaged in her children's learning. Billie jibed that 'people like me' are judged 'like horses' – by their teeth and their shoes. She felt that her point of view was dismissed before she had even started talking.

Contemporary early childhood education pedagogy is play-based. Within the Early Years Learning Framework, educators are guided to support children to learn a range of skills and orientations through play. There is a strong research base to support play based learning (Dockett & Fleer, 1999). Children can learn foundational academic skills about numbers, space and measurement, for example, by moving, clustering and counting stones in the garden. Most participants in the study wanted their children to play with others in ECEC settings, but a significant number wanted more emphasis on learning processes that would support children in school. They did not see play as a strong vehicle for learning academic concepts, but as a space for socialisation. These parental concerns about play-based curriculum resonate with findings of other studies (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Dockett, 2011). A large comparative study on ECEC approaches to working with the children of recent immigrants found that many families favoured greater emphasis on academic instruction (Tobin & Kurban, 2010).

The authors suggest that parents

> make calculations (correct or incorrect) about what their child needs now, the world he/she will encounter in the near and more distant future, and the kind of person they want to see their child become. This parental calculation includes a consideration of both their hopes and their fears, and reflects their assessment

> of the local context in which they live. Many immigrant parents want the preschool to provide more of an emphasis on academics or on host-language acquisition, not based on a theory of learning but instead on a pragmatic concern about how their child will do in primary school and the consequences of their child doing poorly. (Tobin & Kurban, 2010: 81)

Families in disadvantaged areas more commonly report that a focus on learning is extremely important to them when choosing a child care centre (73%) than families in the most advantaged areas (58%) (Mission Australia, 2014). When Billie and other parents in the study expressed a desire for 'sitting time' or structured learning experiences they were seeking the pedagogical experiences they felt their children need to know for school. Knowing how to behave in school settings is part of what Delpit (1988) and Apple (1979) have described as the 'hidden codes of school' that privilege children with middle class forms of cultural capital because of the alignment of school codes with the behavioural and communication codes in middle class and white families. Indeed, pedagogies that assume children do not need explicit instructions and practice with school codes disadvantage children from working class families. The families in our study who wanted more explicit instruction for their children felt there was no space within the service to question the appropriateness of play-based and 'child-centered' pedagogy for their children.

In *Families at the Centre,* Billie and other parents reported that their children often engaged in unstructured, undirected play while attending ECEC. This does not mean that educators were not supporting academic learning through play based learning, but it does suggest that they were not communicating this effectively to families. Misconceptions about play-based learning can occur when service providers do not take the time to listen to families and understand and validate their values about education. The language educators may use to describe their teaching practice may not resonate with the understandings families have. Certainly some families indicated that service providers told them about 'play' but not that they had an opportunity to talk about learning in the way they conceived of it. The failure of services to engage in dialogue with these families undervalues the expertise that families have about their own children and the importance of family assessments of their own context. Yet these assessments are a critical part of the picture. Furthermore, some families, like Billie, had first-hand knowledge of schooling practices that were overlooked in ECEC settings.

Spaces for families to articulate their views on what their children need to be successful learners are an important facet of effective education. Successful transitions occur when parents, early childhood educators, classroom teachers and children all believe a child is ready for school (Docket & Perry, 2013). While there is some recognition in the literature (and in practice) that it is necessary for educators to engage with the educational beliefs and child rearing styles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (SNAICC, 2008), culturally diverse families (De Gioia, 2009) and families whose child has a disability (Grace et al., 2008), there is less written about this in relation to low income families (Grace et al., 2014). All these family types expressed a desire for services where their children were prepared for school and could socially integrate with children from different backgrounds. However, they did not always feel an alignment between their values and beliefs about how and what children should learn and those they encountered in early childhood settings. This finding speaks less to debates about the value of play or academic instruction as a vehicle for learning and more to the importance of educators honouring the values and knowledge of families.

This professional skill of being able to initiate and engage in meaningful dialogue is complicated by the stigma of poverty. Professionals need to be attuned to the histories and present experiences of disrespect and stigma that families in high poverty contexts carry. As Billie so effectively communicates, 'people like her' are frequently treated with disrespect. When she is met with professional language that tells her what is best for her children without listening to her first, she feels (probably rightly) that the professionals she is talking to understand very little about her context and therefore about her children's needs. It is important that all professionals that work in high poverty contexts have the skills and ongoing professional development to work with families (Aylward & O'Neil, 2009; Press, Sumsion & Wong, 2010) living with daily adversities, the accumulated effects of resource shortages over time and the stigma of poverty.

The cost of failing to communicate with and engage families – all families – is high if children are missing out on services that could help them thrive. For children with disability, this could mean a lengthy delay in the identification of their needs, slower diagnosis and a missed opportunity for early intervention. Billie's daughter Beth was diagnosed with autism a few years after she started school. Other families in this study first recognised that their child might have a disability when they started attending an ECEC service. Once their children were routinely engaging with other children the same age, families' niggling concerns about their development and behaviour started to crystalise. Staff who listened respectfully to families and worked closely with children could help families on the path to diagnosis. Billie and Beth did not have that opportunity.

Key message: Listen to families and value their expertise.

Connected families

For some of the families in our study, early childhood education and care is about much more than their own child. While these families overwhelmingly have the interests of their children at heart, their focus is not only upon 'my child' – they want good services for other children in their neighbourhood and community. This focus on collective needs is significant in some under resourced communities where there are long standing habits of resource sharing and interdependence. Social capital is vital to the wellbeing of people who are disadvantaged. Some families were keen also to articulate social visions borne from their experiences and to participate in civic society.

Larissa

Larissa is an experienced parent. The first of her five children was born when she was very young. Over the years, she had observed that early childhood education gave children an advantage. She wanted her youngest to have the same benefits other children had and to attend ECEC services "so her mind is stimulated just like all the other kids". However, Larissa believed advantages needed to be shared across the community and that there was no point in one child gaining without their peers also gaining advantages. So, when she went looking for ECEC for her daughter she also set about gathering knowledge for and from her community:

We knew other people in the community and we started pulling strings and starting helping mums who were in need. I communicated a lot with the mums and asked them what are your interests? What would you like for your children? Because then I can kind of do my research in how to help them. Then we did the 'trace up' and found this place.

Larissa's 'trace up' led her to identify a service that could cater to the needs of a group of families she had come to rely on. She had met a group of like-minded mums in the informal outdoor space of a mobile playgroup. It was predominantly an Aboriginal group but included South American, Pacific Islander, and Anglo women – all of whom felt like outsiders among the middle class families who regularly used the service. They identified shared needs – homes free of domestic violence, credentials that would enable them to get jobs and educational support for their children.

With help from a skilled playgroup facilitator, they secured a regular indoor venue and talked about how services could work best for them. They then developed a model which held family, child and educational professionals at arms-length. Larissa and her friends had had negative experiences with professionals. Some had first or second hand experiences of ineffective child protection interventions, and/or other experiences of unresponsive mainstream institutions such as schools or health care providers. The group met together, set shared agendas and then requested resources via a group leader. Their nominated leader met regularly with professionals from a range of local child, family support services drawn from government and non-government services. One of their first activities had been a domestic violence campaign directed to their communities.

Equally important to this engagement with NGO and government resources, was the support they offered each other in their everyday lives. The group buffered each other from the setbacks and humiliations they encountered as they worked to create safe environments where their children could thrive and learn. Larissa related numerous frustrations in her early independent efforts to elicit information from Centrelink, mainstream ECEC services and adult education providers. Her enquiries about the services available were often met with blank stares or misleading information. This left her feeling misunderstood and often, that there were no resources or subsidies for her. However, once she had the group, she could air and disarm her frustrations and rejuvenate within the safe confines of the group. She was then able to re-enter the fray and work towards the needs of her family and of the group. Through her 'trace up', she eventually found an early intervention service where there was capacity for them all to enroll. The service was specifically designed to provide early intervention for children with disabilities. Specialised services were needed by some but not all of the families. The director, however, was willing to enroll the other families who just wanted access to ECEC service in the company of other 'like' families. Here, they could access ECEC immediately with no fees and continue to cluster together. For Larissa and her friends, this social network was a vital source of child rearing support, and the wrap around resources provided by government and non-government providers allowed the group to build their capacity and become a significant resource to the community in their own right.

Larissa's story tells of the importance of social networks and collective action. The opportunity to develop networks and create a safe space to explore child rearing issues can make a profound difference to families. A group of new arrivals in another location used similar opportunities for informal networking, exchanging information and gathering resources. They garnered resources which suited their fledging community's needs and priorities for adult employment. Similarly, an evaluation of the UK Sure Start program (Williams & Churchill, 2006, p.6) found that the most effective programs encouraged active participation and supported parents 'to identify their own, their groups', and their communities' needs as a key organising principle'. In both of these cases, informal social networks were a starting point that allowed systems information to be collected and filtered so the families could use available resources to act on their own knowledge and values about what was good for their children. These opportunities to assert values and priorities and set their own agendas were particularly important for families with reason to distrust the latest expert knowledge on parenting or child development.

These social networks were empowered by obtaining access to 'structural' resources - space, outreach work and transport - as well as information resources so that they could find out about and access different pockets of service systems. Of equal importance were 'process' resources that allowed communities to develop, to articulate priorities and get organised (Farrell, Tayler & Tennent, 2004).

The families in the study who experienced the most acute, compounded disadvantages were also often socially isolated. Some of the most disadvantaged told stories about parenting or other support groups which ran for 12 weeks or so but left them in a position where ECEC services were still far from their reach. Some joined groups with the aim of accessing services for their children only to find the interpersonal dynamics among participants very challenging. Others, like Billie, tried services but quickly retreated into isolation. These stories of unrealised entry into social networks and/or services underlined the complicated and sometimes confounding nature of building service use confidence for both families and service providers (Grace & Bowes, 2010; Moore & Skinner, 2010). Recurring themes in the stories of those who had moved from low to higher levels of confidence in services were soft entry points, highly flexible and responsive guidelines and timeframes, opportunities to enter and build effective social networks and the capacity to set agendas and 'cobble together' resource packages which met their needs.

These conditions made taking up the educational resources for children available in the ECEC system more possible for families facing economic adversities.

Key message: It's not just 'my child'.

Implications for policy and practice

The families we interviewed provided us with a deeper understanding of the reasons why low-income families use ECEC services less than other families. They told us to remember:

- Recognise family needs for security and safety
- Keep ECEC affordable for all families
- Listen to families and value their knowledge
- It's not just 'my child'

These exhortations from families have profound implications for policy and practice. They show a need for adaptable, flexible and responsive services that are supported by government policy and funding.

Recognise family needs for security and safety. We learned from Amanda and parents like her, that safety and security must, of necessity, take precedence over access to formal education and care when it is not embedded in services that can support their immediate needs for security. If all children are to benefit from early learning, then policy needs to support services that reach out to families grappling with basic needs so that they can connect or reconnect with families as they go through difficult times.

Keep ECEC affordable for all families. Families told us that it is essential that ECEC is affordable. If families cannot afford the fees, they cannot use the services. Subsidies are a critical policy tool to ensure that the lowest income families can afford to use ECEC. The Productivity Commission's draft report into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning recommended restricting mainstream Commonwealth subsidies to children whose parents are working or studying at least 24 hours per fortnight. This recommendation would make ECEC unaffordable for tens of thousands of children, as it would for Danh and many of the families in *Families at the Centre*.

Listen to families and value their knowledge. The families in our study demonstrated the importance of professional listening and responsiveness. Attention to children's learning is not enough and professional discourse can alienate and stymie the flow of dialogue. Families do not want a one-way flow of information. They want services to listen and respect their efforts to provide for their children. It is important that they can communicate their expertise about their own children and situation so the care and education of their children is tailored to their needs. Billie and others showed us that service providers need to listen and respect family values.



It's not just 'my child'. All families want what is best for their children, but mothers like Larissa helped us see that achieving the best can involve networks of families or whole communities. Instead of focusing solely on their own children, sometimes families want to work together, share ideas, give each other courage and support, and collectively secure the resources they need. But developing trusted networks can be difficult, especially when families have had their trust betrayed in the past, and finding the right resources can be overwhelming. There is a need for practitioners skilled in delivering services which support families to build supportive networks through soft entry points.

The key findings from *Families at the Centre* show that ECEC should be accessible for all children, and so point to a need for flexible, responsive services that have wide horizons and are not narrowly focused on the daily education and care of children. The responsibilities of working with these families can be taken on by all services whether they are stand alone or wrap around. Holistic, integrated or wrap around services are intended to provide easy access to a range of education, family and health services needed by families. In this, they are a close match to the service and resource needs expressed by many of the most disadvantaged families in the study. There are, however, many different ways to offer integrated services (Moore & Skinner, 2010; Sumsion, Press & Wong, 2012; Press et al., 2010). As the stories from this study illustrate, a critical feature of holistic services is their ability and willingness to enable families to articulate their own needs and priorities and to move at their own pace towards realising their goals. ECEC thus needs to work with, rather than against, these broader pursuits. This requires a high level of skill and training for educators working in these services and policy needs to support teacher training and interdisciplinarity.

Changes to government policy, especially to policies governing eligibility for access and subsidies, can facilitate the development and ongoing sustainability of appropriate services for low income families. Organisations successfully delivering ECEC services to low income families report a need for government funding that is long term with uniform reporting and compliance requirements across departments and levels of government (Sumsion, Press & Wong, 2012). Funding needs in-built flexibility so that it can be used creatively to respond to the local context. And there is a need for funding that accommodates the cost of maintaining good quality services that are able to support the professional development of staff to work with families with complex needs, to collaborate across sectors and invest in rigorous evaluation.
There are many examples of good practice with families on low incomes. The following links provide more information about some of the resources and services which have been developed by *Families at the Centre* partner organisations:

Gowrie SA - Invest to Grow: Final Evaluation Report. Through the Looking Glass –Community Partnership in Parenting.
http://www.gowriesa.org.au/sites/default/files/TtLG%20final%20report1-8_1.pdf

Mission Australia Centre – Kingswood.
http://sd.missionaustralia.com.au/324-mission-australia-centre-mac-kingswood

Mission Australia – Playford Secure Families.
http://sd.missionaustralia.com.au/250-playford-secure-families

Brotherhood of St Laurence –
Programs for children and families
http://www.bsl.org.au/services/children-and-families/

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