
© Copyright 2006 (please consult author)
Birth to three years:
A review of the literature around the care and education of young children and babies

Professor Ann Farrell
School of Early Childhood/Centre for Learning Innovation
Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology
Victoria Park Road Kelvin Grove Q 4059
a.farrell@qut.edu.au
2006

This literature review was commissioned by Communities for Children (Loganlead, Kingston & Waterford West).
SUMMARY

Birth to three years is a critically important time for children’s learning, health and wellbeing. From birth (and before birth) children are active learners, capable of interacting, as competent persons, with their world. Evidence from a range of disciplines and theoretical perspectives demonstrates the importance of the first years of life for children’s present and future lives.

This brief, plain language review is designed as a resource for practitioners who work with children - to provide quick-glance evidence of policy, research and practice in support of the best possible start for our youngest citizens. It follows a comprehensive review of birth to three conducted by David, Gooouch, Powell and Abbott (2003) as part of the United Kingdom’s Birth to Three Matters Project and Framework for Effective Practice. While the current review is more annotative than that of David and colleagues (2003), the two reviews concur that very young children should be respected as people in their own right in a society that recognizes and caters for their capabilities; and with warm, responsible people who provide opportunities for their holistic learning, health and wellbeing.

The review shows that:

- Children live in the present and what happens in the present impacts on their future.
- Children’s lives are diverse and the contexts of their lives are changing.
- Children are active and competent learners.
- Children are citizens with rights to the best possible start in life.
- The care and education of children and those around them should be a shared responsibility.

It is organised into three sections:

1. Policy imperatives
2. Research evidence
3. Practice implications
1. POLICY IMPERATIVES

The early years have become the focus of much international and national policy and research. The watershed United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) articulated children’s rights to provision, protection and participation. In so doing, it set the orientation for early years policy and research that would culminate in reports such as Starting Strong II (2006), a twenty-country study of early childhood education and care (ECEC) produced by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Starting Strong II (2006) profiles ECEC as a public good – good for health, education, the society and the economy (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003). In the period between the 1989 UNCRC and the 2006 OECD report, impetus for policy reform has also come from Australia’s Seen and Heard Report (ALRC/HREOC, 1997), which advocated the rights of children to be both seen and heard in Australian society.

In 2006, Australia committed to ECEC in its Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2004-2009 Early Childhood – Invest to Grow (2006), with $142 million over four years devoted to its Communities for Children initiatives. Table 1 provides a summary of key documents that profile the early years as a policy priority for the period 2000 to the present. (See also Irvine, 2005, for a comprehensive overview of key Commonwealth and Queensland ECEC policy documents for the period 1990 to 2004.)

Typically, ECEC is multi-layered, differentiated and supported by a raft of policies and provision. It is auspiced across federal and state bodies and incorporates services for children birth to eight in health, childcare, preschool, school, child and family support and protection services (Wright, 2005). Irvine (2005) argues that, within an increasingly market-driven climate, the net result of its prevailing funding and governance is “a fragmented and incoherent system of services for young children and their families” (p. 18).

In summary, early years policy imperatives at both federal and state levels focus on:

- intervention in light of risk factors and protective factors in families and communities –with an impact on child outcomes.
- building capacity in community-led development and service delivery using a strengths-based approach.
- partnerships among public, private and community sectors.
- innovative and flexible policy implementation and evaluation.
- links between investment in the early years and future national prosperity.
Such imperatives are supported by leading national organizations such as National Investment for the Early Years (NIFTeY), Australian Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and Early Childhood Australia (ECA) (2006). These imperatives are also set within the context of heightened consciousness of children at risk and the public management of the lives of young children and those around them by way of adult-generated legislation and policy (See also Beck, 1999; Danby & Farrell, 2005; Esping-Andersen & Sarasa, 2002).

Australia has 1.4 million children aged 0-5 years (ABS, 2005), yet spends only 0.45% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on services for children under 3 years, significantly less that most OECD countries (OECD, 2006). Australia’s young children now have increased life expectancy, are born to older parents, are more prone than in the past to adverse mental and physical health issues (such as obesity, diabetes and asthma) and are more likely to live in poverty than are children in other OECD countries (Press, 2006). So too, Australia has increasing numbers of children and families who are marginalized by their refugee or asylum seeking status (Farrell, 2006). In Queensland, rates of suspected child abuse and neglect have increased, Indigenous children and young people have poorer health than their non-Indigenous counterparts and some local government areas, such as Logan, have higher than average concentrations of single parent families (CCYP&CG, 2006).

In Australia, some 46% of children aged 0-12 years use a combination of formal and informal care (CCYP&CG, 2006), though not necessarily children from disadvantaged backgrounds and for whom it would yield exponential benefit (ACOSS, 2006). Australia’s Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (Harrison & Ungerer, 2005) found that, of the 5107 infants in the research sample, 36% experienced outside parental care, with Queensland having a relatively higher use of formal care than in other states/territories. Australia-wide there is a significant increase in market-driven, for-profit long day care provision (Sumsion, 2006). As in numerous other Western countries, there is also a policy thrust to measure and monitor the quality of early childhood services (National Child Care Accreditation Council, 2005). Along with measurement has been systematic critique of quality measures. Dahlberg and Moss (2005), for example, consider conventional measurement of quality using standards, accreditation and audits, as a “normalizing framework - either required by government or offered by experts” (p. 9). Debates around measurement aside, quality in ECEC persists as a public policy priority.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Priority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Starting Strong</td>
<td>Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Paris</td>
<td>Care and education in most OECD countries have different histories, funding, governance and staff training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision</td>
<td>Productivity Commission, Melbourne</td>
<td>Education should contain a care component and care should involve education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>A Head Start for Australia: An Early Years Framework</td>
<td>New South Wales Commission for Children &amp; Young People &amp; Queensland Commission for Children &amp; Young People</td>
<td>Focus needs to be on child and family wellbeing at the level of government, non-government and community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services</td>
<td>Department for Education and Skills (DfES) United Kingdom</td>
<td>Services for children, young people and families should coordinate around individual and family needs and take account of their views.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Inquiry into Early Childhood Services (Wright)</td>
<td>Government of South Australia</td>
<td>Service integration, joined-up, seamless services in health, education and family support should be delivered in one location and overseen by a person consistent in the family’s life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2004-2009 Early Childhood – Invest to Grow</td>
<td>Commonwealth Department of Families Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA)</td>
<td>Risk and protective factors in families and communities affect child outcomes - early intervention has cost benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Starting Strong II (Bennett &amp; Tayler)</td>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Shared responsibility for ECEC, coherence and quality in training and status of ECEC staff are policy priorities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Policy imperatives such as those outlined here draw largely upon research evidence in support of the importance of the earliest years for children’s present and future lives. As Canadian researcher Hertzman (2004) argues, “The early years last a lifetime” (p.4). Evidence comes from a range of disciplines and theoretical perspectives as diverse as (yet not confined to) neuroscience, policy research, childhood studies and the human rights literature. Analysis reveals that funding bodies, policymakers and early years advocates are championing evidence from neuroscience in their justification of ECEC.

Brain research and its practice implications are being taken up internationally in early years policy. Over recent years, there has been a growing evidence based (much of which is being generated by researchers in Canada) that attests to the importance of the early years for brain development, later health and life chances (Gallagher, 2005; Hertzman, 2000; 2002a; 2002b; 2003; 2004; Hertzman & Power, 2003, 2004; Lally, 1998; Mustard, 2000, 2002, 2006a, 2006b; Mustard, McCain & Bertrand, 2000; Mustard & Picherack, 2002).

Halfon, Shulman and Holstein (2001) and Gallagher (2005) concur that:

- the child’s brain is characterized by plasticity and is changed by experience.
- sensory motor and social experience contributes to neural foundations.
- relationships influence social and emotional wellbeing.

Halfon, Shulman and Holstein (2001) also argue that, in the first 3 years of life, the number of synaptic connections in the brain doubles to approximately 1,000 trillion – more than will be present in the adult brain - and foetal exposure to malnutrition, viral infections, drugs, may result in negative mental health outcomes. Against the backcloth of Canada’s National Children’s Agenda (1997), Hertzman and Power (2003) also identify the impact of early life experiences or ‘pathway effects’ for early neural connections and wellbeing trajectories. They stress the importance of secure attachment to a trusted caregiver prior to school in the ‘sculpting’ of neural connections. Hertzman (2004), in turn, draws from Canada’s National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) to show that a quarter of Canada’s young children may be developmentally vulnerable at school entry. And Hertzman (2004) concurs with Kohen, Hertzman and Willms (2002) in arguing that greater gains can be made by the most disadvantaged children who participate in high quality ECEC.

A policy corollary of this evidence is that strategies for children to achieve gains must be inter-sectoral, multi-layered and provide ‘universal access’ to environments that support children’s learning, health and wellbeing, not just those that protect children at risk.
Policy research also supports the policy imperative for ECEC, involving both care and education that is integrated, cross-sectoral, multi-disciplinary and takes a whole-of-government approach (SCRCSSP, 2002). There is considerable evaluation of the participation of children and families in integrated services in the United Kingdom (Pascal et al., 1999), Canada (Connor, 2001), and Australia (Farrell, Tayler & Tennent, 2004, 2006; Taylor, Farrell, Tennent & Patterson, 2004). And, as noted earlier, across a range of Australian jurisdictions, there is a growing commitment to service integration for improved delivery of and access to child and family services.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (2006) highlighted the pressing need for a framework for high quality integrated education and care services, incorporating the prenatal period to the early years of school. So too, Australian author, Francis Press (2006) calls for strategic, whole-of-government action to target quality and regulation of childcare and workplace and taxation reform in favour of families and children. And South Australia’s Inquiry into Early Childhood Services (Wright, 2005) calls for service integration consistent with a community expectation that government services in health, education and family support be more successfully joined up or seamless, delivered from one location and overseen by a figure consistent in the family’s life. While the rhetoric around integration is laudable, endemic structural anomalies between education and care continue to work against integration.

A tenet of the integration thrust is the crucial role that families play in the health and wellbeing of children (Hayes, Weston, Gray, Qu, Higgins, Hand, et al., 2006). Recognizing, respecting and building stronger families are becoming the focus of integrated child and family services and a research priority of the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) (2006) - in line the national research priority Promoting good health and wellbeing for all Australians. Taking seriously this priority means revisiting notions of family in culturally diverse contexts. Morphy (2006) and Weston and Gray (2006) note the lack of fit between the communal notions of family in some Indigenous communities (involving kinship and lineage) with notions of the nuclear family. Another discontinuity may be between traditional childrearing practices and those of Generation Y and/or Millennials, who are already parents or are likely to be. While there is popular interest in the emerging digital generation (Carlson, 2005; Prensky, 2001; Sheahan, 2005), the Millennial generation and versions of ‘generational philosophy’ associated with this rising generation (Denham & Gadbow, 2002, p.6) invite further analytic work. In the popular literature, Millennials are seen to multi-task using a range of technologies and media, have multiple and simultaneous career identities and are highly mobile. Such discontinuities require policy makers and practitioners to engage with culturally diverse families and communities in shaping and implementing services.

The challenge, then, is to recognize and cater for likely diversity in cultural and generational practices across families and communities. A clear corroborating message from Starting Strong II (2006) is that “sound policy can not be a quick fix from outside but more a matter of democratic
consensus generated by careful consultation with the major stakeholders” (p.206).

**Childhood studies** and the sociology of childhood framework also inform the policy thrust to consult with children about child and family services, both in Australia (MacNaughton et al., 2004; Tayler et al., 2004) and the United Kingdom (Clarke et al., 2003; Edwards & Alldred, 1999; McAuliffe & Lane, 2005; Malone, 2003; National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services, 2004). This theoretical approach sees children as competent informants of their own experience (Alanen & Mayall, 2001; Danby, 2000; Danby & Baker, 1998; James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2002, 2003). Children’s competence is attested by a range of empirical studies where children operate as competent informants, for example, concerning their sense of community (Farrell et al., 2004), their everyday decision-making and their consent to engage in research with adults (Danby & Farrell, 2004, 2005).

**Children’s rights** has also emerged as a key driver of policy and practice with children birth to three. (For further reading on young children’s rights, particularly in medical and social research, see Alderson, 2000a, 2000b, 2004, 2005.) Since the UNCRC (1989) and the unprecedented awareness of breaches of children’s rights, the children’s rights agenda has been translated, largely, into a child protection agenda (Farrell, 2005). Indeed, the “legislative responsibility for child protection has become a major theme in the international human rights arena and a major policy issue within early childhood education and care” (Farrell, 2004, p. 234). The work of Fox Harding (1996, 1997) around child protection has been particularly influential in child and family policy and in state-family relations in both Australia and the UK. Fox Harding (1997) notes two distinct approaches on a continuum of possible stances on state-family relations. These are the *authoritarian approach*, whereby the state intervenes in the life of the family; and, on the other end of the continuum, the *laissez-faire approach* where there is little or no state intervention in family life. Put simply, in the authoritarian approach, the state is seen to know best for families and children and, in the laissez-faire approach, families are seen to know what is best for themselves. Such work around the rights of children, families and the state, has come to inform debate and practice in the care and education of children birth to three.
3. PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The policy imperatives and the research evidence highlighted here point to the opportunities for learning, health and wellbeing afforded to young children. For such affordances to be realized there needs to be serious and substantial whole-of-government investment in the quality and availability of ECEC that is comprehensive, universally available, accessible, and community-led. Investment of this kind stands to generate significant social and economic benefits for society and to build resilience and capacity for children, families and communities.

A starting point for practice is working with parents. Abbott and Langston (2006), with respect to working with children birth to three in the UK, emphasize that “Anybody who works with young children usually works with their parents – and people who work with the youngest children tend to work even more closely with parents, because they are the most important people in young children’s lives” (p. xi). Working with parents, in turn, requires working with families in ways that both respect and challenge cultural and generational dissonance that may exist between and among families.

In sum, implications for practice include:

- integrated, multi-disciplinary approaches to working with children birth to three years. Such approaches challenge service providers and funding bodies to work beyond single-service models and to build local strengths and aspirations using skilled professionals from a range of disciplines (e.g., education, health, human services and the law).

- working with children as people in their own right whose current experience impacts on their lives in the present and maximises their life chances in the future.

- working with parents and families in their diverse contexts in ways that respect their strengths and build their capacity. This is particularly so in working with young parents who may face social exclusion and disadvantage by virtue of their age and social status.

- providing opportunities for children as active and competent learners, people who are capable of interacting with their physical and social world. This requires learning contexts and opportunities that respect and cater for children’s growing capabilities.
REFERENCES


Polity Press.
effect on health, learning and behaviour throughout life. Keynote address presented at the Western Australian Primary Principals Association, Perth.


