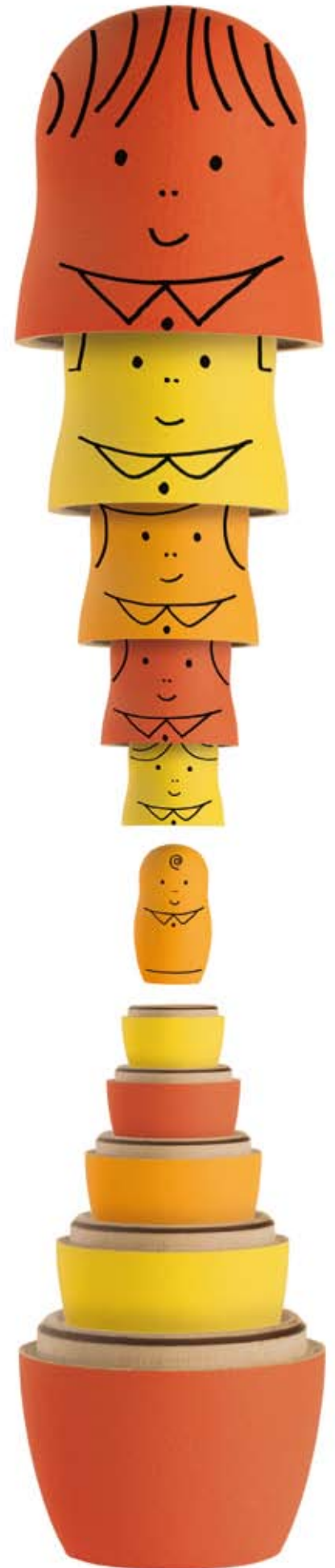


# Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform:

Early Childhood  
Development  
Discussion Paper





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## Contents

Ministerial foreword	5
Executive summary	6
Introduction	8
Key achievements in early childhood development	9
Objectives: what we aspire to achieve	10
1. Partnerships with parents and communities - children thriving in supportive home and local environments	11
2. System development and reform - families accessing connected services	14
3. Workforce reform - skills and knowledge to deliver for children and families	18
The future	20
How to contribute your views	20





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## **Ministerial foreword**

Our children are our future and we must do the best we can to ensure they thrive, learn, grow and develop. This is a responsibility for all of us – parents, families, communities and governments.

We know that a child’s experience in the early years has a profound impact on their development and educational outcomes.

Compared to the rest of the world Victorian children are doing well against a range of health, wellbeing and education measures.

We also know that there is more we can do to integrate and deliver better services for children and young people, and their families. This is particularly so for children and families who are most vulnerable and who may need additional support to help them achieve better outcomes.

The Government’s decision to integrate children and education services across Victoria into the new Department of Education and Early Childhood Development marks the beginning of a new era. We now have a great opportunity to improve our services so they better support the needs of children and families into the future.

This discussion paper outlines our proposed five year reform agenda, capitalising on the new opportunities and building on the policy directions set out in 2007 in *Victoria’s plan to improve outcomes in early childhood*.

We want to know your thoughts and aspirations for Victoria’s early childhood services. I encourage you to let us know your views and help support our children to fulfil their greatest potential.

I look forward to your contribution.



**Maxine Morand MP**

Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development



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## Executive summary

Over the past eight years the Victorian Government has undertaken substantial reform to deliver on the commitment to ensure that children's learning, development and health is a key priority.

Among a range of achievements, the Government has created the role of Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development, worked hard to improve services and made services more accessible, particularly for families experiencing disadvantage. This work has been underpinned by the development of a strong legal framework to ensure children's safety. Important future reforms have also been signalled through the report *Victoria's plan to improve outcomes in early childhood*.

The creation of the Department for Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) ensures there is a focused responsibility for the learning and development of children and young people from birth to adulthood in the new department.

In relation to early childhood development, this means the department has responsibility for services that support the health, wellbeing and development of young children.

The creation of the new department recognises that effort and investment in the period from birth through to eight years of age establishes the foundation for children's future social, physical, emotional and cognitive attainment, and also increases opportunities for parents to participate in work or study.

The new department and the Commonwealth Government's commitment to ensure the early years are a national priority provide an unprecedented opportunity to deliver reform that makes a real difference for Victorian families.

In this context, the Victorian Government is developing a Blueprint to set priority directions for education and early childhood development over the next five years. This discussion paper on the *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development* outlines proposed priorities and actions for early childhood services from birth through to eight years of age and provides a series of questions for comment.

A key focus proposed in the discussion paper is to develop a high quality, coordinated service system with children aged 0–8 years of age at its centre. For Victorian families, our objectives are to ensure that

- All children make steady and continuous progress along a learning and development pathway understood by parents
- Parents in all locations can access coordinated early childhood learning, care and health services for their child
- Children experiencing disadvantage, disability or developmental delay are provided additional and specialist supports when required, with parents centrally involved in decision-making
- All children receive learning, care and health services delivered by a high quality workforce
- Parents receive information and support to ensure their child grows up in a healthy and nurturing environment that encourages continued development and learning
- Parents have greater opportunities to participate in work or study.

To achieve these objectives the next phase of reform will focus on three areas: partnerships with parents and communities, system development and reform, and workforce reform. Proposed actions in each of these key areas are described in the following sections.

### **1. Partnerships with parents and communities**

To support parents to create the best possible home environment we propose to improve the services and information available to families in making the home environment positive for learning, development and health, particularly for vulnerable families. We propose to further support parents through information on commonly understood developmental goals for children and information about the quality and availability of service providers.

To strengthen local service planning, coordination and delivery, we propose to improve partnerships with local government through a focus on developing early childhood services that meet community needs, including the provision of multiple services at a single site.

### **2. System development and reform**

To improve seamless delivery of 0-8 learning, care and health services we propose to integrate play-based learning into child care services; further support transitions to school; establish a continuous approach to learning and development for 0-8 year olds; and promote the development of networks to link up 0-8 services and staff.

To increase access and the level of participation in services, while ensuring affordability, we propose to improve the quality, breadth and flexibility of Maternal and Child Health Services and kindergarten programs. A further priority is to enhance early intervention through improved support for children and families experiencing disadvantage, particularly Koorie families.

### **3. Workforce reform**

To establish a high quality workforce we propose to attract, develop and retain high quality staff; improve staff to child ratios where children are in care for a significant period; improve the percentage of qualified staff working in early childhood services both through incentives and regulations; and invest in professional learning.

There has never been a more important time to increase our efforts to ensure all children benefit from high quality early childhood services. The priorities for action outlined in the discussion paper form a desirable and achievable plan for the next five years.



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## Introduction

Victoria now welcomes around 70,000 children into the world every year. The Victorian Government is strongly committed to working with families to ensure that every one of these children has the best possible start in life. We know that for Victoria to be a successful and vibrant community into the future, we must ensure that our children are healthy, cared for and have every opportunity to fulfil their learning and development potential.

The period from birth through to eight years of age sets the foundation for a child's future social, physical, emotional and cognitive development. A focus on this period of a child's life recognises that effort and investment in the early years yields the best outcomes for children and families.

It is for this reason we continue to work hard to improve the services provided to children and their families. The establishment of the new Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) provides an opportunity to further improve the outcomes for all Victorian children by giving a single department responsibility for the learning and development of children and young people from birth to adulthood.

It is vital that the one system underpins the entire developmental journey, and this new department will provide unique opportunities for innovative partnerships and stronger relationships between parents, communities and services.

The role of early childhood services in the continuum of birth to adulthood is of critical importance. Over the past eight years the Victorian Government has embarked on an ambitious reform agenda, including the *Victoria's plan to improve outcomes in early childhood* report.

However, we are always seeking to improve and there has never been a better opportunity to shape the future of the early childhood system. The creation of DEECD and the commitment of the new Commonwealth Government to make the early years a national priority and deliver improved inter-government collaboration is unique.

To deliver success, we will need to continue to strengthen existing partnerships with local government and communities, and develop the relationship with health services - for example, undertaking antenatal care reform in partnership with the Department of Human Services. These partnerships, together with the alignment of policy and funding with the Commonwealth Government, will drive the future evolution and reform of early childhood services.

This discussion paper proposes an ambitious reform agenda to capitalise on new opportunities and responsibilities, and builds on current policy directions.

The new Blueprint will be the plan by which Victoria undertakes the next phase of early childhood sector reform. It will be the plan by which Victoria identifies its priorities for action over the next five years and reflects high expectations of ourselves and our partners.

## Key achievements in early childhood development

The Victorian Government recognises that the best investment the Government can make is to support parents to give their children the best opportunities.

Twelve months ago we released the *Victoria's plan to improve outcomes in early childhood* report and we have taken important steps in its implementation. The *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development* will now take forward the early childhood sector reform agenda and capitalise on the creation of a single department (DEECD).

Reform achievements in the interests of Victorian children, over the past five years, have been substantial.

### **1. Ensuring children are a priority**

- The Premier established the role of Minister for Children in 2004, making clear the Government's commitment to all Victorian children
- Founded the Victorian Children's Council in 2005 to support the Premier and the Minister for Children by providing expert independent advice about policy for Victorian children and young people
- Established the Children's Services Coordination Board to bring together key decision makers across departments and ensure coordination of activities affecting children
- Created the Office for Children to assist the Minister to drive reform and ensure early childhood services meet the needs of Victorian children and their families
- Developed the annual *The state of Victoria's children* report, providing an overview of the health, development, learning, safety and wellbeing of Victoria's children and young people in 35 outcome areas.

### **2. Delivering more effective early childhood services and supporting the workforce**

- Strengthened the Maternal and Child Health Service with an emphasis on increasing participation, particularly for vulnerable children in the second and third years of life
- Strengthened kindergarten education and management, and provided additional subsidies for low-income families to ensure all children can benefit from a foundation of early learning
- Increased the graduate starting salary of kindergarten teachers to the same level as primary school teachers
- Funded 55 children's centres since 2003 and recently committed to provide funding for 40 additional multi-service children's centres. These centres support the availability of a range of early childhood services at a single convenient site
- Improved the availability of early childhood intervention services through additional places and packages for children with a disability or developmental delay
- Strengthened partnerships with local government to encourage local coordination and innovation that recognises the needs of communities and improves outcomes for children, particularly through the introduction of Municipal Early Years Plans.

### **3. Establishing a strong legislative and regulatory framework**

- Reformed Victoria's child protection system through the new *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*
- Introduced the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005*
- Committed to amend the *Children's Services Act 1996* to improve child care and kindergarten standards, strengthen the role of Children's Services Advisers and reduce administrative red tape for operators.

## Objectives: what we aspire to achieve

This discussion paper proposes a strategic agenda to capitalise on new opportunities and deliver on objectives. A key focus will be the development of a high quality, coordinated service system with children aged 0–8 years of age at its centre.

### **For Victorian families, our objectives are to ensure**

- All children make steady and continuous progress along a learning and development pathway understood by parents
- Parents in all locations can access coordinated early childhood learning, care and health services for their child
- Children experiencing disadvantage, disability or developmental delay are provided additional and specialist supports when required, with parents centrally involved in decision-making
- All children receive learning, care and health services delivered by a high quality workforce
- Parents receive information and support to ensure their child grows up in a healthy and nurturing environment that encourages continued development and learning
- Parents have greater opportunities to participate in work or study.

### **The next phase of reform will focus on three key areas**

Figure 1 below provides the framework for the next phase of reform, which focuses on three key areas.

1. Partnerships with parents and communities – where parents and communities are the focal point for service delivery
2. System development and reform – where early childhood learning, care and health services are aligned and strengthened
3. Workforce reform – a focus on attracting, developing and retaining a high quality workforce.

We will accelerate the pace of reform, while building on the achievements of the past eight years and the current strengths of Victorian early childhood service delivery.

**Figure 1.**  
**Conceptual framework for early childhood and school education reform.**



# 1. Partnerships with parents and communities – children thriving in supportive home and local environments

Governments do not raise children – parents do. Government’s role is to support parents and families in this important task.

For mothers, fathers, step-parents, grandparents and carers, raising a happy and healthy child is an important and sometimes significant challenge. Local communities that are safe, convenient and welcoming enhance childhood and the parenting experience.

Services within the local community are the key supports for families to create a positive, healthy and stimulating home environment for their children, and every community needs to be inclusive and supportive of children and families.

Our strategic directions for ‘partnerships with parents and communities’ focus on three main areas

1. Support parents to create the best possible home environment
2. Provide outcomes-focused information
3. Support the coordination and delivery of early childhood services.

## **Support parents to create the best possible home environment**

Families have the first and most enduring impact upon children’s health, development and wellbeing. The research indicates that secure attachment and a warm, caring relationship with parents underpins all other areas of a child’s development and wellbeing.

The highly regarded *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education* (EPPE) study in the United Kingdom shows that parent-child interaction through activities such as reading, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, painting, and playing with numbers and letters was more strongly associated with children’s intellectual and social development than either parental education or occupation.<sup>1</sup>

More can and should be done to support families in making the home a nurturing environment for learning, development, wellbeing and health. An important part of a nurturing environment is the provision of reliable information about how children develop, the types of activities that support development and how parents can access specialised support if they need it. Information is a powerful tool that should strengthen rather than undermine parents’ capacity and confidence.

While there are significant existing sources of information (such as maternal and child health nurses, and the Maternal and Child Health Line), there are opportunities to provide better and more tailored information for Victorian families. Our reform strategies focus on ensuring parents get what they need, when they need it and how they need it. This work should be undertaken in partnership with local government and reflect an ongoing dialogue with parents.

Assisting vulnerable families in creating nurturing home environments is a particularly critical area of reform. Activities such as supported playgroups can provide peer support and positive modelling that encourages the development of effective parenting techniques. They also create the opportunity for parents to be involved in their children’s play through the encouragement of positive interactions with their own and other children.

1 Sylva, K., Melhuish, E. C., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B. (2004). *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Technical Paper 12 - The Final Report: Effective Pre-School Education*. London: DfES / Institute of Education, University of London.

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## **Partnerships with parents and communities – children thriving in supportive home and local environments**

### **Provide outcomes-focused information**

Information based on commonly agreed learning and development outcomes helps parents to understand their child's development and the important contribution of early childhood services. At present, such information is not consistently shared across early childhood services, schools or with parents.

In early 2008, the Victorian Government approved funding for the development of a birth through to eight years of age framework describing common goals in a child's development and transition plans for children as they move from kindergarten into their first year of school. This initiative will assist parents to understand their child's development and areas in which the child can be supported. It will also be the first time that parents across Victoria have been able to access such plans.

This work will link with Commonwealth Government initiatives focused on developing a nationally consistent Early Years Learning Framework and rating measures for child care services. Together these initiatives will support the development of web-based information about child care services in Victoria and will give parents significantly improved information about the availability and performance of early childhood service providers.

### **Support the coordination and delivery of early childhood services**

Parents need to be able to draw on high quality services in their local community to give their child the best start to life. Services need to reflect the unique needs of families making up each local community and be coordinated around these needs. Clearly, local government has a critical role in this.

The State Government can partner with local government to introduce further reforms that will increase local government leadership in the planning and coordination of early childhood services. Municipal Early Years Plans provide a common map of what is available within a municipality, the strengths and gaps, and outline how a community will respond in the future. These plans represent the key mechanism by which the Victorian Government and local governments work together to support the needs of children and their families.

There is scope to further expand the use of these plans overlaid with community profiles to identify future priority areas for service delivery. These plans could also be used with local government to plan and fund more specialist services; engage in key infrastructure decisions; structure cluster management of community kindergartens; and lead partnerships of parents and providers to make services useful and universally accessible, particularly with schools. There is clearly a need for State and local governments to work closely together to ensure these plans underpin the development of a more cohesive early childhood service system.

Well-planned and coordinated services ensure families can quickly engage with, and move between, early childhood supports. Providing multiple early childhood services on a single site is an important way to support families.

The development of over 40 additional multiple service Children's Centres, to a total of 95 State Government funded centres, and the school modernisation and regeneration projects are significant infrastructure initiatives involving State and local governments. An example is the co-location of kindergarten and child care services with primary schools to provide a seamless transition between kindergarten and school, offer flexibility and choice for working families and maximise access to services.

Alongside State and local government initiatives, the Commonwealth Government has also made a commitment to establish 260 new long day care centres on school, TAFE, university and community sites across Australia. Sixty-five of these will be in Victoria. Together these initiatives create new opportunities to co-locate early childhood services on or near school sites and use schools and children's services as platforms to deliver other government services for families.

Victoria already has some great examples of schools and early childhood services providing co-located services to support families – the opportunity remains to work with governments at all levels to capitalise on these significant initiatives.

# What are we proposing to do?

## **1. Support parents to create the best possible home environment**

- Improve the support and information available to families in making the home environment positive for learning, development and health, particularly for vulnerable families
- Engage families of children of all ages and provide specific guidance on how families can support children's learning, development and health.

## **2. Provide outcomes-focused information**

- Ensure services focus on commonly understood developmental goals for children
- Publish information on service providers that supports parent choice.

## **3. Support the coordination and delivery of early childhood services**

- Strengthen partnerships with local government to ensure early childhood services meet community needs
- Assist families to access multiple early childhood services at a single site, together with the Commonwealth Government and local governments
- Develop schools as children's and community hubs, through co-location of services and increased community use of school facilities.

# Focus questions

1. Is the focus of the reform proposals to support parents to create the best possible home environment right? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?
2. Is the focus of the reform proposals to provide outcomes-focused information right? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?
3. Do you agree with our reform proposals to support the coordination and delivery of early childhood services? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?



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## **2. System development and reform – families accessing connected services**

Victoria needs to develop a cohesive approach to services from birth to eight years of age, bringing them together in a coordinated system for families.

Early childhood services include Maternal and Child Health Services, playgroups, child care, kindergartens and schools. These services are universally accessible and widely used by children and families. Also critically important are the more specialised services and supports for individuals, groups or communities with additional needs to the general population (e.g. developmental delay or disability support).

Our strategic directions for 'system development and reform' focus on three main areas

1. Improve the integration of 0-8 learning, care and health services
2. Increase access, quality and the level of participation in services
3. Enhance early intervention for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs, such as a disability or developmental delay.

### **Improve the integration of 0-8 learning, care and health services**

A significant focus area for the Government is an integrated service system that supports children's development from birth to eight years of age (and through to adulthood).

A key goal of an integrated service approach is that services work together to minimise the disruption to children's development as they progress from one service to the next. For example, if a child has additional development needs at kindergarten, the prep teacher should be aware of these needs at the start of school. For professionals, this also promotes greater collaboration, resulting in the sharing of high quality practice. It can also encourage the common use of resources, such as facilities or information technology support.

An important starting point was realised in early 2008 with the Victorian Government's commitment to develop a 0-8 early learning and development framework and to support transition plans for each child as they move from kindergarten to school.

There are also opportunities to develop an integrated system of targeted support services for children from birth to adulthood, which particularly link

to early intervention efforts. This includes

- Improved coordination, professional development and use of the early childhood, school and health services for children of school age and younger
- Better coordination of approaches to support children with a disability from initial identification through to adulthood
- More coordinated support for Indigenous children, families and communities, picking up on the Commonwealth Government's priority to give Indigenous children an equal start in life.

The establishment of DEECD creates opportunities to use information technology to collect, maintain and share information, beginning at a child's entry into early childhood services. This will assist parents when they move and better support children from vulnerable families.

Strong local networks, drawing on the expertise of early childhood services, can develop local solutions to shared problems. Such networks, operating across Victoria, provide the opportunity to grow and strengthen communities through joint planning, coordination and sharing ‘what works’. These networks would also be well placed to further develop communities that are safe, welcoming and stimulating for children, improving the amenities that parents and children use every day.

Such networks might include representatives from early childhood services, schools, local government, health and other service providers. These networks should build on the significant existing network structures, including local government led networks, school networks, *Best Start* projects, *ChildFIRST* and children and family services networks.

The integration of kindergarten and child care services into a single concept of early childhood education and care is a significant priority. Throughout this document, the term ‘early childhood education and care’ (ECEC) describes an early childhood service that provides both learning and development opportunities provided by a qualified teacher, and a care service.<sup>2</sup> It is important that learning while in child care is encouraged and supported in the interests of children’s continual development.

Integration of these services will initially ensure that a child can access developmentally appropriate learning opportunities while participating in care arrangements. It will drive improvement throughout the services and provide greater convenience for parents to facilitate study or workforce participation.

With this in mind, the Victorian Government proposes to recognise in law the principle that four year old children should have access to a kindergarten program. This reform requires a collaborative effort between the three tiers of government and a range of service providers.

Victoria needs to work with the Commonwealth Government to develop quality measures. This includes establishing a coordinated State and Commonwealth Government approach to standards and regulation that drives quality, supports the integration of ECEC and minimises the red tape for service operators.

### **Increase access, quality and the level of participation in services**

We need to undertake reforms to increase access and the level of participation in early childhood services while ensuring affordability.

Over the past two decades service availability and participation has improved significantly. But we know that some children and their families, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are not able to access services. This can mean that these children arrive at school with unidentified health or developmental issues. International evidence also suggests that high quality early learning programs can be particularly beneficial for children younger than four who are experiencing significant disadvantage.

We have a strong basis for continued reform. We can further promote universal access to four year old kindergarten and strengthen participation in early learning programs for children who are three years old and younger, starting with those experiencing the most significant disadvantage. The Commonwealth Government has also committed to ensure every four year old child has access to 15 hours a week and 40 weeks a year of high quality preschool delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher.

A key challenge will be to progress these priorities while maintaining high quality delivery. Further developing kindergarten cluster governance and coordination arrangements could be a key mechanism to support the implementation of State and Commonwealth Government priorities for kindergarten reform.

Improving the quality, breadth and participation in Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Services, particularly in light of the very large increase in Victoria’s births, is also a possible area for continued reform. An effective MCH Service underpins early identification, parenting, health promotion and early intervention, particularly for vulnerable families.

<sup>2</sup> The ECEC concept is supported internationally, evidenced by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development report in 2001, *Starting strong: Early childhood education and care policy*.

## System development and reform – families accessing connected services

### **Enhance early intervention for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs, such as a disability or developmental delay**

The Government is committed to improving outcomes for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs, and to sustaining an inclusive early childhood system. Early intervention has been demonstrated to positively influence a child's development and strengthen the resilience of the family. In the long-term this results in improved learning, behaviour and health outcomes, and reduced dependence on government supports.

Early intervention and the provision of appropriate support, including high quality targeted services for children with additional needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds, have been a priority focus for the Victorian Government since 1999. This focus is reflected in whole of government policy priorities, such as *Growing Victoria Together*, *A Fairer Victoria* and the *Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework*.

Along with improvements to make universally accessible services more inclusive, the continued development of targeted services is required to support children with disabilities or developmental delays and their families, and those experiencing significant disadvantage, including many Koorie families.

In relation to supports for children with a disability or developmental delay, future reform would consider more consistent and coordinated planning for individuals across service transitions; improve ways to support individuals to further develop capabilities; and build the capacity of mainstream services to be more inclusive.

A starting point signalled in the *Victoria's plan to improve outcomes in early childhood* report is to review early childhood intervention services. This should take into consideration a birth to 18 years of age focus, including early childhood intervention services, the school-based Program for Students with a Disability, and other disability supports. Close links with the Department of Human Services would guide this work.

The Commonwealth Government has also made commitments, including new supports to provide early intervention and specialised child care services for children with autism. This work would progress in concert with the Victorian autism state plan currently being developed.

For children and families experiencing disadvantage, priority reforms would focus on more flexible and innovative services, such as MCH outreach services, supported playgroups and early learning programs for children under four years of age. This work would involve close links with the Department of Human Services, including the *ChildFIRST* networks.

The Victorian Government has also committed to new supports for Koorie families in successive budgets, legislation and key policy documents.

These include the whole of government *Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework*, *Aboriginal Services Plan* and more recently DEECD's new education strategy for Koorie students, *Wannik (Learning Together - Journey to Our Future)*. The Commonwealth Government's priority focus on giving Indigenous children an equal start in life offers a strengthened environment for reform.



# What are we proposing to do?

## **4. Improve the integration of 0–8 learning, care and health services**

- Integrate early childhood education and care, in partnership with the Commonwealth Government
- Establish 0–8 networks of schools, early childhood services, local government, the Department of Human Services and other services to develop local solutions that improve services. These networks would build on existing network structures
- Improve transitions to school and continuity of learning and development for 0–8 year olds, including
  - a new 0–8 learning and development framework linked to existing frameworks
  - linking early childhood health and development to cognitive assessments, for example, combining information from the Australian Early Development Index with early years assessments for English and maths in the first year of school
  - transition plans for children starting school
- Collect, maintain and share information beginning at a child’s entry into early childhood services, through coordinated information technology platforms and supports
- Improve coordination of approaches to support children with a disability from initial identification through to adulthood
- Deliver an integrated birth to adulthood system of health and development support services for children and their families through improved coordination, professional development and use of early childhood and school non-teaching/allied health supports, including school nurses
- Coordinate Koorie support, including a consistent approach to services and family assistance from birth to adulthood, and support for whole of government action.

## **5. Increase access, quality and the level of participation in services**

- Increase access, affordability and the level of participation in kindergarten for three and four year old children, together with the Commonwealth Government
- Improve participation in and the quality and breadth of Maternal and Child Health Services
- Drive innovation in service delivery through support for more flexible and accessible models that meet the needs of diverse and disadvantaged communities.

## **6. Enhance early intervention for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs, such as a disability or developmental delay**

- Review early childhood intervention services in the context of an integrated approach to disability and developmental delay support for children aged 0–18 years
- Provide improved support for children and families experiencing disadvantage, particularly supporting Indigenous families, together with the Commonwealth Government.

## Focus questions

4. Do you agree with our reform proposals to improve the integration of 0–8 learning, care and health services? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?
5. Do you agree with our reform proposals to increase access, quality and the level of participation in services? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?
6. Is the focus of the reform proposals to enhance early intervention for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs, such as disability or development delay, right? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

### 3. Workforce reform – skills and knowledge to deliver for children and families

Every family should be confident about the service their child receives.

A high quality workforce has a profound influence on a child's development. Highly capable staff create safe and nurturing environments, and link families to additional services when required. A highly capable workforce also creates and enhances family and community networks, and becomes a trusted source of information and support.<sup>3</sup>

The early childhood workforce crosses the welfare, health, kindergarten, child care, and school sectors. Reflecting the range of early childhood services, the early childhood workforce includes staff with a diversity of skills and knowledge operating to different cultural norms, regulatory regimes and enterprise conditions.

Our strategic direction for 'workforce reform' focuses on establishing a high quality workforce. The skills and talents of the early childhood workforce, and the staffing structures of services, have a critical impact on the service quality. We know that there is a significant opportunity to improve outcomes for children and families through reform in this area.

In early childhood education and care (i.e. kindergarten and child care) services, staff to child ratios and group size are considered key drivers of quality.<sup>4</sup> Improving staff to child ratios can have a significant influence on the staff – child relationship and is a key area of reform.

Through the review of the *Children's Services Regulations 1998* the Victorian Government is moving to regulate family day care arrangements and outside school hours care services to establish consistent minimum standards for services. The review of these regulations will examine in detail the benefits and implications of changes to ratios and group sizes.

We also know that staff qualifications are an important indicator of a quality service. Skilled staff provide positive, consistent supports for children and families; however, a significant proportion of the child care workforce continues to be unqualified or have only basic qualifications. As at 2007, 55 per cent of staff employed in Victorian child care centres had a relevant two year or more tertiary qualification and a further 16 per cent had three or more years of work experience.

We need to ensure that staff can deliver services at a qualified level, improve the overall quality of services and raise the status of the profession. In line with the proposed reform in the *Victoria's plan to improve outcomes in early childhood* report, we need to move toward a goal of all new early childhood education and care staff holding at least a post-secondary school early childhood qualification by 2016. We also need to pursue reform that will result in all centres employing a four year trained teacher.

As a starting point, the review of the *Children's Services Regulations 1998* will examine in detail the level and mix of qualifications that should be required within different services and the likely resulting benefits for children.

Victoria also needs to work with the Commonwealth Government to pursue reform focused on improving the proportion of qualified staff. A key opportunity is to connect the Commonwealth Government's commitment to establish National Child Care Quality Standards with Victoria's review of regulations to jointly improve the quality of child care. In parallel, work needs to be undertaken to ensure there is sufficient staff capacity to meet the Commonwealth Government's commitment that 15 hours of kindergarten is available to each child.

It is also clear that across all early childhood services we need to further focus on attracting, developing and retaining a high quality workforce.

3 OECD (2001), *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

4 Fiene, R. (2002), *13 Indicators of Quality Child Care: Research Update*, Presentation to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Professional development opportunities and strategies to attract staff to the maternal and child health services, early childhood intervention services, and early childhood education and care workforces, particularly in rural areas, can further support the development of a high quality workforce and address skill shortages. To an extent, workforce issues are similar in every State in Australia. Skills shortages and a competitive employment market mean many professions are facing workforce challenges, and it is no different for early childhood services.

Recognising this context, it is a particularly important time to ensure that staff in early childhood services have career development opportunities in addition to respected and satisfying work. As we look to the future, we also need to recognise the evolving responsibilities of staff in an increasingly coordinated service environment.

More can be done to ensure services have staff with the right skills.

Across the system we can

- Undertake long-term planning to identify future workforce needs
- Encourage opportunities for joint professional learning both within early childhood services and with schools, including the development of skills to work in multidisciplinary teams
- Work with universities and TAFEs to develop courses or programs which include expected future skill needs, including for staff and leaders
- Explore how professional groups and registration authorities can support continued skilling.

As we move toward seamless service delivery, new workforce reform challenges and opportunities will arise. There are clearly significant opportunities for reform to improve the quality of the early childhood workforce and all governments must play a role.

## What are we proposing to do?

### **7. Establish a high quality workforce**

- Attract, develop and retain high quality staff, together with the Commonwealth Government
- Improve staff to child ratios where children are in care for a significant period
- Improve the percentage of qualified staff working in early childhood services through incentive and regulations, together with the Commonwealth Government
- Develop forums and invest in joint professional learning within early childhood services
- Develop forums and invest in joint professional learning between primary schools and early childhood services
- Contribute to the national review of quality standards and rating measures for child care.

## Focus questions

- 7. **Is the focus of the reform proposals to establish a high quality workforce right? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?**

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## The future

There can be no challenge more important than ensuring Victorian children have the best start in life. Improving learning, development and health outcomes for Victorian children is a challenge we embrace and are motivated by because we know how important it is to our future as a productive and enriched community.

Much has already been achieved on the journey of improvement - but there has never been a more important time to increase our efforts, place high expectations on ourselves and seek greater levels of coordination and collaboration across all tiers of government.

We will continue to deliver innovative models of management, funding and infrastructure to develop and support communities to deliver sustainable high quality services. We will work together with you, our partners, to establish the best outcomes for our children. And we will continue to develop more effective childhood services that reflect the excellence our children and workforce deserve.

We are all participants in this journey, and your comments are a valuable part of the development of a framework that ensures children are the priority. Our collective promise should be to do all we can to ensure every Victorian child has the opportunity to fulfil their greatest potential.

## How to contribute your views

### Public consultation process

We have raised a number of focus questions through this discussion paper, and would encourage you to respond with your thoughts.

Your comments are a valuable part of the future development of our early childhood and school education services and systems.

Electronic versions of the discussion papers can be downloaded from the Blueprint website at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/blueprint>

Additional information on the consultation process, including information on how to make a submission, can also be accessed from this site.

Written submissions close Friday 16 May 2008.  
All submissions will be treated as public documents.



