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# Early childhood services

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The early years are the most important for learning and development. Quality programs assist families to provide children with the best start in life and to significantly improve a child's education, employment and social outcomes.

The August 2007 machinery-of-government changes meant that early childhood programs that support the health, development and learning of Victoria's young children were transferred to the new Department. These include kindergarten and child-care, regulation of children's services, capital grants for new kindergartens and children's centres, the maternal and child health service, primary school nursing, parenting services, early childhood intervention services, inclusion supports, Best Start local partnerships and local planning.

Since that time, the Department has transferred 600 regional staff from DHS, ensured business continuity for services provided to children and families, and maintained effective partnerships with local governments and other key service providers. A new regional reporting framework has been developed and 1341 DHS funding and service agreements transferred to the Department.

The Department's efforts in early childhood services have focused on continued implementation of Victoria's plan to improve outcomes in early childhood by:

- strengthening the health, development and learning of 0–5-year-olds
- enhancing the provision of early childhood education and care services, including a stronger integration between schools and early childhood services
- improving the early years workforce.

## Strengthening the health, development and learning of 0–5-year-olds

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### Improving the Maternal and Child Health Service

The Maternal and Child Health Service provides a comprehensive and focused approach to the promotion, prevention, early detection and intervention for physical, emotional and social factors affecting young children and their families. It comprises a universally available service, which is jointly funded by the Department and local government. It offers ten key age-and-stage consultations, and a flexible component that includes first-time parent groups. In addition, the Department funds the 24-hour Maternal and Child Health Information Line and an enhanced service that targets more vulnerable and high-needs families and incorporates a home-visiting service.

#### Highlights

- The new Key Ages and Stages Service Activity Framework to reflect current evidence and best practice was piloted in four local government areas.
- The Maternal and Child Health Information Line, which provides a 24-hour information service to families with children 0–5 years of age, was expanded and approximately 75,000 calls were answered, an increase of over 8100 on the previous year.

### Strengthening Early Childhood Intervention Services

Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS) provide support for children who have a disability or developmental delay and their

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families from birth to school entry. Services include information and support, planning and service coordination, individual and group therapy, and education.

ECIS are provided by approximately 60 agencies and nine Department-managed Specialist Children's Services teams.

### Highlights

- An additional 150 ECIS places and 150 ECIS packages were implemented to address areas of highest need, as well as waiting lists.
- As part of the autism support strategy, ACTNOW, Regional Autism Coordination Teams have been developed to coordinate regional responses for children from birth to 6 years with autism across all regions in Victoria. Training and secondary consultation were provided to over 8000 professionals and families.
- Hearing impairment initiatives were developed and included an information kit, *When a Baby's Hearing Loss is Diagnosed: Fact Sheets for Families*. A program was also developed to link parents of children newly diagnosed with a hearing loss, to other families for mutual support. Additional resources were made available for early childhood intervention services to support these families.

## Early childhood intervention reform

The Early Childhood Intervention Reform project aims to ensure that intervention services for children with disabilities or developmental delay are targeted and delivered effectively, consistently and equitably. It also aims to improve integration of services in early childhood and into school. The project commenced in 2008 and is due for completion in late 2008.

### Highlights

- Key principles of the Early Childhood Intervention Reform project were developed.
- A Project Advisory Group, comprising key stakeholders, was established and initial directions were developed.

## Local planning, partnerships and infrastructure

The Department recognises local government as the lead planner for early childhood services. The key mechanism is through formal Municipal Early Years Plans. The Department works in partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria, the legislated body for local government in the state.

The following data shows the percentage of local governments that are involved in key services:

- maternal and child health (100 per cent)
- 4-year-old kindergarten (96 per cent)
- children's services for 3-year-olds (66 per cent)
- family day-care (85 per cent)
- occasional care (75 per cent)
- long day-care (72 per cent)
- neighbourhood house early years programs (65 per cent)
- Early Childhood Intervention Services (37 per cent).

### Best Start

Best Start is an early years prevention and early intervention initiative that aims to improve the health, development, learning and wellbeing of all Victorian children. It does so by supporting communities, parents and service providers to improve universal early years services to respond to local needs. Improvements in services are expected to result in:

- better access to child and family support, health services and early education

- improvements in parents' capacity, confidence and enjoyment of family life
- communities that are more child- and family-friendly.

### ***Children's Capital program***

The Department has supported local councils and other community-based providers of early childhood services to redevelop, refurbish and upgrade existing infrastructure. A total of \$16.95 million was allocated in 2007–08.

#### **Highlights**

- All 79 local councils have Municipal Early Years Plans in place and many are currently being reviewed.
- The Children's Capital program delivered:
  - five municipal-wide infrastructure grants to support local government to redevelop early years infrastructure
  - nine children's centre grants towards the establishment of new children's centres
  - one hundred and thirty-two renovation and refurbishment grants for existing community-based kindergartens and child-care centres
  - eight hundred and twelve minor capital grants for kindergartens, child-care centres and outside-school -hours care services to upgrade facilities or to purchase equipment to create safer, more pleasant environments in which children can play, learn and develop.
- Two new Best Start sites commenced in the cities of Greater Dandenong and Brimbank.

### ***Young Readers program***

The Government committed \$2.1 million in the 2007–08 State Budget for the implementation of the Young Readers program. The program is a partnership between the Department, the State Library of Victoria and local government.

The Young Readers program provides:

- a free picture book for all Victorian children at their 2-year-old maternal and child health visit
- a free *Rhyme Time* booklet and DVD, book bags and information on local libraries for families at the four-month maternal and child health visit
- professional development to early childhood professionals, librarians and maternal and child health nurses.

### **Providing additional help for Indigenous children**

The Department recognises that early childhood provides a unique opportunity to address the disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous children and their families. Initiatives include the In-Home Support program in five locations, the Koorie Early Childhood Education program, enhanced home learning and Aboriginal Best Start.

The In-Home Support program aims to improve parenting capacity of Indigenous mothers and families and achieve measurable improvements in health, development, learning and wellbeing of Indigenous children (with a focus on children from birth to three years).

The 2007–08 State Budget allocated \$2.7 million over four years to provide access of up to ten hours per week free kindergarten to Indigenous 3-year-olds who hold a concession card. The objective of this initiative is to improve the developmental outcomes for Indigenous children through participation in kindergarten.

The Koorie Early Childhood Education program supports Koorie children and their families to access and participate in kindergarten. The program also provides advice to kindergartens across the state about providing culturally relevant experiences for Koorie children.

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The Home-Based Learning Enrichment program is a complementary program for children aged 3–6 years that will be implemented as an extension of the In-Home Support program in three sites.

#### Highlights

- At June 2008, 92 eligible Indigenous 3-year-old children were linked to 46 kindergarten services.
- The Department increased regional Koorie Early Childhood Education program staff from 7.8 FTE to 11 FTE by increasing part-time staff to full-time.
- As part of the In-Home Support program, the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service received funding to provide an enhanced Maternal and Child Health service to a minimum of 200 Indigenous children per year.

### Providing extra support for children and their families

The Parenting Services program aims to promote the independence of health development of families with children from birth to 18 years. It does so through the provision of parenting support, information, advice, referral and resources to parents, and training and consultancy to professionals.

The program supports the statewide Parenting Research Centre and the nine Regional Parenting Services, as well as one-off projects.

The Primary School Nursing program offers a health assessment to children in their first year of school. It is designed for Victorian children attending primary schools and English language centre schools. The health assessment tool is the School Entrant Health Questionnaire.

#### Highlights

- Staff at Parentline, a confidential counselling service for families with children from birth to 18 years, answered over 11,000 calls regarding complex parenting issues.
- A new, improved School Entrant Health Questionnaire was developed.

## Enhancing the provision of early childhood education and care services

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### Commonwealth–State relations

Under the COAG Reform Agenda, for the first time, Ministers and their governments have agreed about the strategic importance of Early Childhood Development. This is reflected in the COAG-endorsed aspiration:

That children are born healthy and have access to the support, care and education throughout early childhood that equips them for life and learning, delivered in a way that actively engages parents and meets the workforce participation needs of parents.

Development of implementation plans relating to Commonwealth commitments include:

- universal access to early childhood education for all children in the year before formal schooling
- quality standards and a rating system for child-care and pre-school
- development of a National Early Years Learning Framework
- early childhood development workforce strategies including the rollout of 1550 new university places, HECS remission for early childhood teachers working in areas of high need, and removal of TAFE fees for child-care trainees

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- national early childhood development performance information strategy, including rollout of the Australian Early Childhood Development Index.

### Highlights

- Seven priority areas, including the Productivity Agenda, were established.
- Funding reform towards Specific Purpose Payments and National Partnerships was developed.
- A statement of objectives for early childhood education and care was drafted.

## Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework

In January 2008, the Victorian Government announced plans to develop a 0–8 Early Years Learning and Development Framework to enhance the provision of early childhood education and care services. This work is being progressed jointly with the VCAA.

The framework will link with the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) for schools and provide opportunities to support every child's individual learning needs and transition to school.

This framework will also provide a universal language and understanding of the learning and developmental pathways of children, support and guide parents and professionals who are involved with children aged 0–8 and provide consistent, practical and evidence-based approaches to supporting children's development.

### Highlights

- Analysis of curriculum and learning frameworks for children from birth to 8 years, including a review of 17 national and international jurisdictions was completed.
- A symposium on the development of the national Early Years Learning and Development Framework was held.

- A steering committee and advisory groups to guide the development of the framework were established.

## Transition planning

The Department has commenced the introduction of transition plans to support children moving from kindergarten or child-care settings to primary school. These plans will be informed by the 0–8 Early Years Learning and Development Framework.

An individualised plan enables a smooth transition from early childhood education and care settings to school by ensuring that there is a shared understanding of information such as a child's interests, learning style, abilities and support requirements.

## Implementing amendments to the *Children's Services Act 1996*

The *Children's Services Act 1996* provides for the licensing and regulation of kindergarten and child-care services to protect the health and safety of children and ensure that their developmental needs are met.

### Highlight

- The Act has been amended to introduce some immediate provisions, provide for the licensing and regulation of outside-school-hours care and family day-care sectors, and introduce other reforms from May 2009.

## Licensing and regulating children's services

In Victoria, there are over 2800 licensed children's services with a licence capacity of over 124,000 places providing kindergarten, long day-care and occasional care. The primary objective of the legislation is that children are safe and their developmental needs are met when being cared for and educated in a licensed children's service.

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Complementary strategies are implemented to encourage, promote, monitor and comply with the legislation.

### Highlights

- Over 4000 visits to children's services were completed.
- A response was made to more than 1700 notifications of incidents and complaints about children's services.
- Three prosecutions of services, where children were exposed to serious risk and harm when they left a service unaccompanied, were completed.
- The *Children's Services and Education Legislation Amendment (Anaphylaxis Management) Act 2008*, requiring all children's services to have an anaphylaxis management policy and to enable the making of regulations in relation to anaphylaxis, received royal assent on 4 March 2008.

## Strengthening kindergarten services

The Victorian Government provides funding for all children to access a kindergarten program in the year prior to formal school entry (two years before Year 1). Funded kindergarten programs are provided by a range of organisations. In 2007, kindergarten programs were provided at 1608 kindergarten locations.

### Highlights

- Fifty-seven thousand, four hundred and ninety-seven children attended kindergarten in 2007. This means that 94 per cent of Victoria's children benefited from a kindergarten program prior to school entry.
- Kindergarten programs in Victoria were delivered through 736 community-based kindergartens and 387 long day-care centres (a mix of private and community

based) as well as 85 private schools and 19 government schools.

- The kindergarten fee subsidy was increased to \$730 on 1 July 2007, making ten hours of kindergarten effectively free for children who hold concession cards.
- Rollout of the kindergarten cluster management continued, with 44 of all community-based locations now participating in a cluster.
- \$10 million over four years, commencing in the 2007–08 State Budget has been allocated to improve access to kindergarten for children in long day-care settings and to assist kindergartens to offer extended-hours care.
- A total of 5400 children with a broader range of additional needs across Victoria were supported by Pre-school Field Officers. These officers were employed by 19 local councils and 13 community service organisations.

## Improving the early years workforce

The overall goal of the workforce initiatives is to increase the quality of early childhood programs by increasing the supply of qualified staff and to improve the skills and qualifications of early childhood education and care workers.

Two schemes – the Early Childhood Teaching Scholarship Scheme and the Incentives for Early Childhood Teachers in Long Day-Care Scheme – were introduced to encourage diploma-qualified staff to undertake a degree in early childhood education and to encourage recent early childhood teaching graduates to take up employment in long day-care settings. Recipients must agree to work in a long day-care centre as an early childhood teacher for two years.

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## Highlights

- Thirty-three scholarships were granted as part of the Early Childhood Teaching Scholarship Scheme.
- Six incentives packages were awarded as part of the Early Childhood Teachers in Long Day-Care Scheme.
- Thirteen scholarships for Indigenous people to upgrade qualifications from a diploma in children's services to a degree in early childhood teaching were awarded.
- Thirteen Rural Employment Grants to offer financial incentive to early childhood graduate teachers to take up a position in a rural kindergarten were provided.
- Two hundred and four sessions of accredited anaphylaxis training, funded by the Department, were delivered to over 4250 children's services staff by the Asthma Foundation of Victoria.
- The Centre for Adolescent Health engaged and commenced delivery of a range of professional development training activities for secondary school nurses.
- Fifteen scholarships were allocated as part of the Maternal and Child Health Workforce project to support recruitment and retention of maternal and child health nurses.