Early Childhood Intervention Services vision and key priorities

Community Care Division
Foreword

Putting Victoria’s Children First

The Government’s Children First policy confirms our commitment to ensuring that all Victorian children have the best possible start in life. The policy says that:

‘As a community which values children, our priority is to ensure that development and learning are optimised for all children wherever they live, play and are cared for.’

The support given to children from birth through to the early years at school has a crucial impact on how children develop as individuals and within their families and communities. Parents have known this for centuries. Research has confirmed it.

The challenge for government is to provide those supports in ways that are accessible and relevant to all families - regardless of their needs or postcode.

With the Children First policy as our starting point, we are achieving this by developing a whole new approach to services for young children and their families. We are building linkages and partnerships between services - such as maternal and child health, preschool, childcare, family support - so that services work together and it is easier for families to have access to the full range of supports they need.

Early childhood intervention services are a crucial part of this picture. We now know how important it is that disabilities and developmental delays are identified and responded to as early as possible. Early intervention can make the world of difference - it can be the gateway to new opportunities and possibilities for children even with the most complex needs.

With this in mind, the Government allocated an additional $6 million in the 2003-2004 budget to boost early childhood intervention services over the next four years. These funds will help strengthen early childhood intervention services and make them more available and responsive to the changing needs of children with disabilities and developmental delays.

I think that you will find this statement of Early Childhood Intervention Services vision and key priorities an exciting indicator of where we are headed. You will see that our commitment is to building early childhood intervention services that are integrated with the other services that children, families and communities use. You will see that our future is one that is built on the principles of equity, partnership and inclusion.

I commend this vision to you and invite you to work with us as we continue to find new ways of putting Victoria’s children first.

Hon Sherryl Garbutt MP

Minister for Community Services
Background

In Victoria, Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS) are provided by the Department of Human Services and a range of non-government organisations (NGOs) funded by the department. ECIS include a range of services for families with children with a disability or developmental delay, prior to school entry, whose support needs are additional to those usually available through universal services. ECIS aim to provide parents and families with the knowledge, skills and support to meet the needs of their child and to optimise their child’s development and ability to participate in family and community life.

Over the last 30 years, these programs have evolved from small groups of services established by families, charitable groups and government in response to local needs, to a larger network of services that receive more than $23 million in government funds. Currently, ECIS are delivered by 54 NGOs and nine department-managed Specialist Children’s Services (SCS) teams. The programs they provide include special education, therapy, counselling, service planning and coordination, and assistance and support to access services such as preschool and child care.

The government’s Children’s First policy statement and the additional funding provided to expand ECIS, offer a strategic opportunity to focus the service system on earlier identification, strengthen supports for families and implement a new service and funding model to ensure greater equity of access to services and transparency in funding allocation.

This document provides policy directions and key priorities for ECIS for the next three years. It is based on consultations between the department and non-government services held over the past three years. In addition, this document incorporates views expressed by parents during consultations about ECIS held in October and November 2001. Further, Early Childhood Intervention Australia (Victorian Chapter) Inc and the Association for Children with a Disability have supported more recent consultations held in May 2003, to finalise an agreed vision for the future of ECIS in Victoria.

The department, in developing a policy position for ECIS, acknowledges that families with children with a disability or developmental delay are partners in the service system. The department also recognises the importance of the ‘early years’ of life for families and children in providing opportunities and experiences to promote community inclusion and participation.
Families caring for a child with a disability or developmental delay are able to access flexible and responsive specialist supports within the universal platform of services, to support them in raising their child within the family and community and enabling them to achieve their developmental, social and emotional potential.

**Key priorities**

In achieving this vision, ECIS will deliver better outcomes for children with a disability or developmental delay, their parents and communities through the integration of specialist services within early education, child care, maternal and child health and family support services.

Key ECIS priorities in delivering this vision include:

- parents as partners to promote the development and early learning of their child.
- clear, visible and accessible entry points to ECIS for parents and families.
- equity of access to ECIS for those who need supports additional to those available through universal services.
- a comprehensive and integrated continuum of flexible, locally-based child and family services that builds on the platform of universal services.
- service delivery that is evidence-based and incorporates a detailed understanding of the principles that underpin ECIS. These include, but are not limited to:
  - family centred practice
  - participation and inclusion
  - using natural learning opportunities and environments
  - tailoring models of service to individual needs.
- focus on prevention and recognition of the changing and challenging environment in which families live and work today.
- recruitment, training and retention of an effectively skilled and resourced workforce.

**Implementation**

This document provides direction for ECIS in the context of the government’s *Children First* policy and the Department of Human Services early childhood policy framework.

Key priorities for ECIS over the coming years are outlined with strategies to progress a more effective service system with a focus on enabling earlier identification, strengthening supports for families and ensuring greater equity of access to services. Shared commitment and cooperation of key stakeholders is central to effective implementation of an agreed vision and service directions for ECIS.
Goal 1

ECIS are part of a comprehensive and integrated continuum of child and family services (spanning government, non-government and private providers) that supports all children and families. ECIS provide additional supports for children with a disability or developmental delay, prior to school entry, whose support needs are additional to those usually available through universal services.

Strategies

Collaborative service development that ensures:

- effective systems planning to develop a comprehensive continuum of ECIS within the universal platform of child and family services.
- clear entry points for access to ECIS to enable early identification and referral.
- timely access to a range of ECIS information, including a website, printed material and a statewide 1800 telephone number.
- a shared understanding between service providers of roles, responsibilities, service delivery and service outcomes.
- integrated government and non-government universal service systems able to effectively link with specialist services.
- a comprehensive and integrated continuum of specialist services that operate flexible, locally-based child and family services that build on the platform of universal services.
- development of professional networks and integrated service delivery at sub-regional levels across all providers of services for families with young children.
- families of children with a disability or developmental delay have timely and targeted access to the continuum of family, community and professional resources to ensure optimal development of the child and build family resilience.
- a culture of empowerment where access to services is inclusive of all children and is part of community culture and expectation.
Goal 2

ECIS are linked to the development of collaborative relationships with universal services to build community capacity, foster participation of all children and families in local community life and enable the early identification of children and families in need of specialised support.

Strategies

Development of service planning and provision that is based on:

• understanding that children with a disability or developmental delay and their families have the same core needs as other children and families—these needs can be addressed by universal services such as maternal and child health, playgroups, family services, child care and preschool.

• recognising that children and their families may need varying levels of additional support and environmental adaptation to address additional needs and promote maximum participation in their day-to-day lives.

• developing more effective linkages with universal services, such as maternal and child health, general practitioners and preschools, to promote early identification and referral of children in need of specialised assessment and support.

• providing support that complements the knowledge and skills of staff in universal services, acknowledging their expertise in working with young children and that the core methods that are effective with all children are also effective with children with disabilities or developmental delay.

• strengthening the focus on prevention across the whole early childhood infrastructure and the development of a shared understanding across health, education and care professions with regard to family and child wellbeing.

• cross-department and cross-government collaboration that promotes a comprehensive whole of government approach to the early years.

• effective interventions that are informed by research and evidence-based practices and are delivered based on agreed approaches to practice standards.

• service provision that is regularly evaluated and assessed against agreed standards.

• a strategic and planned approach to supporting families and children at key transition points.

• service provision that focuses on the strengths of the family and child and takes advantage of the natural environment in which families and children live to enhance skills and wellbeing.
Goal 3

The principles of family centred practice underpin ECIS delivery. Services will focus on building parents’ capacity to care for their child and promote independence and choice for families in navigating the service system, acknowledging the links between children’s developmental outcomes and their immediate experiences within the family.

Strategies

ECIS will promote family centred approaches to service delivery including:

• a continuum of service responses that reflects a partnership between families and professionals.
• evidence-based practices shown to make a difference to families.
• promoting family capacity to make informed choices and self-manage in all stages of intervention, including planning, delivery and review of services.
• services that are sensitive and responsive to cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic differences and any other issues that may have an impact on family wellbeing.
• agreed goals between the family and the service that are directed by the family’s aspirations and the articulated changes they wish to see for themselves and their child.
• evaluation of service provision which is reflected in the outcomes for families and children as measured by the progress towards their stated goals.
• sufficient time allocated to engage and work effectively with families to identify and address their needs and to inform the planning for relevant and appropriate service outcomes.
• services and supports provided to children and families in an individualised, flexible and responsive manner.
• the development of a skilled workforce that is committed to working in partnership with families and parents to build family resilience and promote optimal development for the child.
Goal 4

To ensure the delivery of high quality, responsive services to children and their families, there is a need to develop a highly skilled workforce and strong and sustainable service providers.

Strategies

A workforce development strategy will consider skill sets and competency levels required of professionals working with children with a disability or developmental delay and their families.

The development of an effectively skilled and resourced workforce within a strong and sustainable service system includes:

• recognising the basic principles of child development across service domains to more effectively use the expertise of ECIS and universal services.

• developing expertise to support an increased focus on secondary and tertiary consultation models for universal services and support inclusion of children with a disability or developmental delay in community settings.

• recognising the importance of professional styles and practices that strengthen family functioning.

• developing staff skills that enable change management, flexible staff practices and the use of information technology.

• recognising career pathways, professional development and specialist training needs are linked to recognised ECIS tertiary qualifications.

• acknowledging the value of effective supervision in supporting workers in achieving quality outcomes for children and their families.

• access to professional development based on current research and evidence-based practice that can be translated into everyday interaction with families and children.

• understanding the success of different service models to address the needs of children with high support needs but low incidence disability type and to deliver secondary consultation and training to locally-based services.