

Mitchell Institute policy roundtable: The influence of childhood circumstances on adult health Summary: Thursday 30 October 2014

Early childhood is widely acknowledged as the most crucial developmental period in a person's life; it creates a foundation for the later years and offers a critical opportunity to establish good health and learning outcomes for a lifetime.

As part of our broader focus on chronic disease prevention policy, the Mitchell Institute is looking at the costs and benefits of action (and inaction) in early childhood and the evidence that supports a much-needed shift in health policy.

To inform this work, the Institute commissioned Dr Kim Sweeny of the Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies at Victoria University to look at what we currently know about the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage in early childhood and poor health and education outcomes in adulthood.

His paper, [The influence of childhood circumstances on adult health](#), was the focus of an expert roundtable discussion at Mitchell Institute on 30 October 2014.

About the roundtable

The aim of the roundtable was to consider the evidence outlined in Dr Sweeny's report and discuss the barriers and opportunities in responding to this work and influencing policy change.

The discussion was facilitated by the Institute's Director of Health Research and Policy, Rosemary Calder, and featured a presentation by Dr Sweeny with comments from Professor Frank Oberklaid from the Centre for Community Child Health at The Royal Children's Hospital, Dr Sara Glover, Director of Research and Education Policy at the Mitchell Institute, and Anne Hollonds, from The Benevolent Society.

Roundtable key themes

The problem has been well identified and defined but...

The roundtable agreed that, although research into the impact of childhood circumstances on health in later life is building and has become more robust, there is a clear disconnect between evidence-based knowledge and early childhood policies and services. Despite the growing body of evidence of cause and effect, 22 per cent of Australian children are developmentally vulnerable on at least one or more domains of the [Australian Early Development Census](#) (AEDC) upon entry into school.

What is needed now are solutions

Policy-makers and decision-makers need implementable solutions that work. It was generally agreed that there is little evidence in terms of effective policy because there have been issues with scalability, sustainability, and transferability. The challenges are known, as are the potential returns on investment, but interventions and their outcomes need to be measured and reported to demonstrate to policy-makers the tangible impact that effective and integrated policies and services can have within communities.

Agreed outcomes and a unified voice are needed

Roundtable participants thought that research and advocacy is fragmented and the messages are too diverse. There needs to be a clearly articulated and agreed set of goals delivered through consistent messaging and a united voice. Messages need to be communicated to policy-makers, decision-makers *and* the community, so that public opinion effectively influences policy action.

The point was made that, while there is a comprehensive framework of 43 recommendations in the form of the [Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth's \(ARACY's\) NEST action agenda](#), these may have greater traction and policy impact if an easily implementable smaller selection were highlighted. Once a short, sharp set of unifying recommendations have been agreed upon, these could be linked to long-term outcomes which could be achieved with program or intervention stacking.

Better data and common measures

There was acknowledgement that data and information are critical to understanding the challenges and measuring the impact of services, policies, programs and interventions. However, comparing the effectiveness of early childhood policies, particularly across jurisdictions, is difficult in the absence of common measures. While the AEDC is a good resource, it only assesses children when they enter school at the age of five, which in many cases may be too late. A parallel set of metrics is needed that identifies risks and vulnerabilities earlier. While this will not be easy, participants agreed it is essential.

Strategy must integrate solutions, policies and advocacy

A current barrier to effective early childhood policies is the fragmentation of responsibility for funding, service delivery and outcomes. Different aspects of early childhood fall under the jurisdiction of Commonwealth, state or local government and can sit within the portfolios of health, education, social services, child protection and justice. This siloed approach leads to duplication, disconnection and poor continuity; health, education and child protection policies around early childhood in particular need to be integrated. Whilst some circumstances in each sector or portfolio warrant specific services and policies, what is missing and considered essential is a focus on common outcomes for children, requiring an integrating policy framework.

Similarly, an integrated approach is required from the perspective of early childhood advocacy. In considering the risks and benefits of early childhood investment, related sectors need to look beyond themselves to include other perspectives such as the Business Council of Australia, employer groups and unions who share their concerns and appreciate the potential long-term benefits in addressing them. Other stakeholders who may be viewed as critical or resistant should be engaged and included, as they can help test strategies and language, and can provide constructive feedback.

Include parents, families and communities

Parents, families, and communities, and the way each interacts with a child, are central to early childhood outcomes. Both parents and the parenting environment are crucial. There may be lessons to learn from other countries such as the Nordic nations, where public funding supports engagement with parents early and is sustained through to infancy, providing support and facilitating connectedness with other parents. The evidence shows that by supporting parents in their own right to address issues around education, mental and physical health

and wellbeing, and reducing or eliminating trauma, the benefits are passed on directly to the child. Ultimately, improving the circumstances and experiences of the parent does so for the child.

There is no 'one size fits all' approach

Many participants stressed the need to resist the urge to cherry pick disparate solutions; there is no silver bullet for all contexts and communities. Instead, a combination of approaches are required that are contextually relevant, build individual and community capabilities, and have a multiplier effect.

The roundtable considered that the optimal policy environment would comprise a set of mainstream policies that would provide universal access to capacity-building programs such as early childhood services, preschool and school, and an additional suite of programs and interventions specifically targeting vulnerable children and their parents, families and communities. There is a view that good early childhood infrastructure already exists, but it is not being used effectively. It needs to be strengthened and made more equitable.

Opportunities and options

Participants agreed that the renewed Federalism debate, particularly around areas relating to service provision, taxation, sustainable welfare and health spending, provides a unique opportunity for the early childhood sector to engage with policy-makers.

An early childhood action plan, devised through broad, sector-wide collaboration would provide a unified focal point that effectively and consistently articulates a compelling case for change and a clear roadmap for policy-makers to consider. A national action plan would also be a mechanism for relevant sectors and advocates to:

- Establish an agreed language and consistent set of measures for early childhood
- Articulate specific and agreed national objectives and priorities
- Provide compelling evidence that highlights opportunity and failure points in early childhood and the optimum point for programs and interventions
- Focus on evidence and promote what is proven to be effective and acceptable for children, parents and communities
- Present an economic evaluation to show the cost of doing nothing, and to show the broad benefits of early investment
- Effectively engage and communicate with the community to identify community and political champions.

The Mitchell Institute will work with roundtable participants on the development of a policy action plan in 2015.