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## Children's / Family Centres: An Integrated Approach to Supporting Families with Children

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City of Manukau Education Trust / Discussion Paper 015  
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### Introduction: The early years are crucial

From birth to three years, 85% of the connections in the brain are formed, and the connections formed depend on the environment the child grows up in and the experiences it has.<sup>1</sup>

Parents and carers therefore need to be supported to give their children the best possible environment for their development and wellbeing during this crucial time.

Research indicates that services which are of sound quality can have substantial favourable effects on child health and development, educational achievement, and economic well-being.<sup>2</sup>

*Internationally, there is a strong movement which sees early childhood education and care as a necessary, institutional, public good. It is considered likely to be much more effective if childcare and education are integrated with health support, social support and opportunities for parents to attend training. [...]*

*Over the last decade or so, the academic domains of neuroscience, the sociology of childhood, and longitudinal studies of human development have meshed with the ideas of criminologists, paediatricians and social scientists to strongly emphasise the critical importance of quality early years' service provision.<sup>3</sup>*

An integrated approach to providing early support for young children and their families is essential,<sup>4</sup> but what is the best way to do this?

### How do we best integrate services to support families?

Although there are many services/programmes around the world that aim to provide early support for children and families, not all of them have a strong evaluation component.

A comprehensive report on *The Efficacy of Early Childhood Interventions*<sup>5</sup> stated:

*Examination of 108 large-scale, public early childhood interventions from around the world revealed relatively little empirical data on program effectiveness. Indeed, of the 108 interventions identified in the current review, only 32 interventions had a strong evaluation component, including only three interventions developed and currently operating in Australia.*

The study further commented that:

*Most of the positive effects on child outcomes were the result of centre-based interventions, as opposed to 'home-visiting' or 'case management' interventions. These interventions were grouped in cluster 1<sup>6</sup>, which included programs like the Perry Preschool Project and Head Start.*

Although the study authors acknowledged that this finding was possibly due to superior design quality of the centre-

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<sup>1</sup> Cynader, M. and Frost, B. 'Mechanisms of Brain Development.' In Keating, D. and Hertzman, C. (Eds). (1999). *Developmental Health and the Wealth of Nations*. The Guilford Press, New York.

For more information please see [www.brainwave.org.nz](http://www.brainwave.org.nz)

<sup>2</sup> Karoly, L., Kilburn, M. and Cannon, J. (2005). *Early Childhood Interventions: Proven Results, Future Promise*. RAND, USA. [www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND\\_MG341.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG341.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Wright, B. (2005). *The Virtual Village: Raising a Child in the New Millennium – Report of the Inquiry into Early Childhood Services*. Department of Education and Children's Services, South Australia, p 90. [www.ecsinquiry.sa.gov.au/pages/Home/28116/](http://www.ecsinquiry.sa.gov.au/pages/Home/28116/)

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, B., Moss, P., Petrie, P. and Wallace, J. (2004). *A New Deal for Children: Re-forming education and care in England, Scotland and Sweden*. The Policy Press, Bristol, UK.

<sup>5</sup> Wise, S., da Silva, L., Webster, E., and Sanson, A. (2005). *The Efficacy of Early Childhood Interventions: A report prepared for the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services*. Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, pp 48-9.

<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to identify the most effective 'type' of early childhood intervention, programs were grouped into five clusters according to the availability of the intervention, the intended effects of the intervention, where the intervention took place, and the focal age of children targeted for the intervention.

based interventions,<sup>7</sup> there is other evidence to suggest that home visiting programmes alone may not be enough.<sup>8</sup>

## Children's/Family Centres - overseas

Internationally, many countries are now establishing models of integrated service provision for children and families ranging from the co-location of pre-school and primary school to full service 'one-stop shops' comprising co-located educational, health and social services. Full service examples include Sure Start Children's Centres in the UK, Toronto First Duty in Canada and Children's Centres in South Australia.

### UK – Sure Start

Sure Start Children's Centres are places where children under 5 years old and their families can receive seamless integrated services and information, and where they can access help from multi-disciplinary teams of professionals. The centres are models of integrated service provision, where primary care trusts, local authorities, Jobcentre Plus, education and childcare providers, social services, and community and voluntary agencies work together to deliver seamless holistic services. Local authorities lead in planning and implementing the centres, which allow services to be joined up through partnership working between statutory and voluntary agencies.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Wise, S., da Silva, L., Webster, E., and Sanson, A. (2005). *The Efficacy of Early Childhood Interventions: A report prepared for the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services*. Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, pp 48-9.

<sup>8</sup> Gomby, D., Culross, P. and Behrman, R. (1999). 'Home Visiting: Recent Program Evaluations – Analysis and Recommendations' in *The Future of Children*, 9(1), p 24.

<sup>9</sup> [www.surestart.gov.uk/surestartservices/settings/surestartchildrenscentres/](http://www.surestart.gov.uk/surestartservices/settings/surestartchildrenscentres/)

See also Mooney, A., Moss, P., Cameron, C., Dandappa, M., McQuail, S., Petrie, P. (2003). *Early years and Childcare International Evidence Project*. Thomas Coran Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. Available at [www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/earlyyears/surestart/](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/earlyyears/surestart/)

**Sure Start Children's Centres** in the most disadvantaged areas will offer the following services:<sup>10</sup>

- good quality early learning combined with full day care provision for children (minimum 10 hours a day, 5 days a week, 48 weeks a year)
- good quality teacher input to lead the development of learning within the centre
- child and family health services, including ante-natal services
- parental outreach
- family support services
- a base for a childminder network
- support for children and parents with special needs, and
- effective links with Jobcentre Plus to support parents/carers who wish to consider training or employment

In more advantaged areas, although local authorities will have flexibility in which services they provide to meet local need, all Sure Start Children's Centres will have to provide a minimum range of services including:

- appropriate support and outreach services to parents/carers and children who have been identified as in need of them
- information and advice to parents/carers on a range of subjects, including: local childcare, looking after babies and young children, local early years provision (childcare and early learning) of education services for 3 & 4 year olds
- support to childminders
- drop-in sessions and other activities for children and carers at the centre
- links to Jobcentre Plus services

The Children's Centre network is being expanded, and there will be up to 2 500 across the country by 2008. The Government is committed to delivering a Sure Start Children's Centre for every community by 2010.

### Canada – Toronto First Duty

Toronto First Duty<sup>11</sup> is a partnership of the city of Toronto, the Toronto District School Board, and community agencies supported by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation.

- The city is the systems manager for a large network of community-operated child care and family resource services, in addition to its directly-operated services that include child care, public health, libraries, and parks and recreation programmes.
- The Toronto District School Board operates half day kindergarten and supports school-based family centres and school readiness and nutrition programmes. It also

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[www.surestart.gov.uk/surestartservices/settings/surestartchildrenscentres/](http://www.surestart.gov.uk/surestartservices/settings/surestartchildrenscentres/)

<sup>11</sup> [www.toronto.ca/firstduty/](http://www.toronto.ca/firstduty/)

leases in-school space to community-operated childcare and family support programmes.

- The Atkinson Charitable Foundation is committed to the development of a universal early learning and child care system. The Foundation provides funding and staff resources to projects that further that goal.

**Toronto First Duty (TFD)** is a universal early learning and care programme model for every child that simultaneously:<sup>12</sup>

- meets the developmental needs of children to ensure they reach their full potential
- supports parents to work or study
- supports parents in their parenting role

The TFD model brings together kindergarten, child care and parenting supports into a single program. Through TFD parents are able to access the full range of child and family supports available in their community.

The *Toronto First Duty Phase I Summary Report*<sup>13</sup> concludes that integrated professional supports improve the quality of early childhood programs and reduce risks for parents and children. By engaging parents in the school and their children's early learning, children's social, emotional, and academic readiness for school is enhanced. Integrated program delivery is also cost-effective, serving more families, more flexibly, for the same costs.

The demonstration period for TFD has finished and the partners prepare to make integrated service delivery the operational standard for Toronto's children's service system. The experiences of TFD will further the integration process and inform the implementation of the Best Start 10-year Strategy (a strategy for meeting the early learning and care needs of young children) in Toronto and across Ontario.

### South Australia – Children's Centres

A recent review of early childhood services carried out in South Australia recommended:<sup>14</sup>

- that the focus of early childhood service development is on strengthening and integrating universal services in South Australia
- that integrated Child and Family Centres are developed, commencing in 2005

The South Australian Government is now in the process of acting on these recommendations by establishing Children's Centres, where qualified early childhood staff work together

<sup>12</sup> [www.toronto.ca/firstduty/](http://www.toronto.ca/firstduty/)

<sup>13</sup> Toronto First Duty Research Team. (2006). *Evidence-based Understanding of Integrated Foundations for Early Childhood: Toronto First Duty Phase I Summary Report*. [www.toronto.ca/firstduty/](http://www.toronto.ca/firstduty/)

<sup>14</sup> Wright, B. (2005). *The Virtual Village: Raising a Child in the New Millennium – Report of the Inquiry into Early Childhood Services*. Department of Education and Children's Services, South Australia. [www.ecsinquiry.sa.gov.au/pages/Home/28116/](http://www.ecsinquiry.sa.gov.au/pages/Home/28116/)

with families to provide quality learning and care to support children's development, health and wellbeing. The Centres are friendly places for families to meet, learn more about parenting, gain advice and information on health, personal and family support, therapy services, vocational education and employment.

All **[South Australia] Children's Centres** will offer a mix of services:<sup>15</sup>

- high quality early education and care for children from birth through to the early years of school
- child health information
- family support
- playgroups and play activities
- early assessment of children's learning needs and intervention programmes

At some Centres there will also be Health Services such as hearing and eye tests, immunisation and specialised support such as speech pathology and occupational therapy.

At a Children's Centre

*Children will:*

- learn to play together, building social skills and wellbeing.
- attend high quality child care and education programs.
- receive specialist services when health or learning concerns are identified.

*Families will:*

- find it easier to use health, child care, education and family support services.
- have more child care and early learning options.
- link up with other families with young children.
- get information about parenting and young children's learning and healthy development.
- get help from staff if concerned about their child's health or learning needs.
- have options to consider a return to school, further study or employment.

*Communities will:*

- find it easier to support families with young children.
- have a strong voice about the programs and services offered.
- have space for groups to form and meet e.g. fitness and health programs
- create more opportunities e.g. adult education and vocational programs.

The South Australian Government is investing more than \$23 million to establish 20 Children's Centres across the State.<sup>16</sup>

### Children's/Family Centres – New Zealand

New Zealand examples include Family Service Centres, which are one-stop-shops for families and at this stage are located in low-income communities. There are currently six

<sup>15</sup> [www.childrenscentres.sa.gov.au/](http://www.childrenscentres.sa.gov.au/)

<sup>16</sup> [www.childrenscentres.sa.gov.au/](http://www.childrenscentres.sa.gov.au/)

operating - in Mangere, Huntly, Opotiki, Porirua and Motueka as well as the Great Potentials' Foundation model in Papakura. Their core services can include pre-school centres, child and family services, Plunket and HIPPY (Home Interaction Programme for Parents and Youngsters). A variety of other services are offered, according to the individual centre. These include Social Workers in Schools, parenting education and other educational opportunities for adults and children.<sup>17</sup>

The Family Service Centre in Papakura is located on the grounds of Kelvin Road School and provides HIPPY, family counseling, children's holiday programmes, health services and social workers in schools. In addition, the Living and Learning Foundation (a not-for-profit organisation) is currently in the process of establishing a Mangere Family Centre and aims to establish five Family Centres in Manukau overall, as well as others around the country.<sup>18</sup>

In September 2006 the government announced funding for seven early years service hubs:

*The seven Early Years Service Hubs will be established in high need areas to provide a central point where families can access a range of services, from antenatal care through to parenting support and education. The Early Years worker attached to each hub will help reach families and keep them connected to core services.<sup>19</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> [www.greatpotentials.org.nz/index.php?page=family-service-centres](http://www.greatpotentials.org.nz/index.php?page=family-service-centres)

<sup>18</sup> Personal communication with Michelle Pratt, Living and Learning Foundation, 8 October 2007.

<sup>19</sup> NZPA. (18 September 2006). *Government announces early intervention help for at-risk families*. Available on MSD website as *Early Years: Giving children the best possible start in life*. [www.msd.govt.nz/media-information/press-releases/2006/pr-2006-09-18.html](http://www.msd.govt.nz/media-information/press-releases/2006/pr-2006-09-18.html)

## Recommendations

- **In order to ensure the best possible outcomes for children, families must be effectively supported. More Children's/Family Centres should be established in Manukau since these centres show the benefits of providing co-located, accessible and non-stigmatised services in a school or community setting.**
- **Consideration should also be given to providing a base for some of the more intensive services/programmes (such as Early Start,<sup>20</sup> Family Start,<sup>21</sup> Whanau Toko I Te Ora<sup>22</sup> and programmes provided by the Family Help Trust<sup>23</sup>) at these centres so that families can link effectively with a variety of services such as drug and alcohol counselling and anger management programmes. This may be one strategy of increasing our chances of engaging 'hard-to-reach', 'agency wary' families.**

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<sup>20</sup> Fergusson, D., Horwood, J., Ridder, E., and Grant, H. (2005). *Early Start Evaluation Report*. Early Start Project Ltd, Christchurch.

<sup>21</sup> Centre for Child and Family Policy Research. (2005). *Outcome/impact evaluation of Family Start: Final Report*. Prepared by Auckland Uniservices Ltd for the Centre for Social Research and Evaluation. Ministry of Social Development, Wellington. [www.msd.govt.nz/work-areas/social-research/families-whanau/outcome-impact-evaluation-of-family-start.html](http://www.msd.govt.nz/work-areas/social-research/families-whanau/outcome-impact-evaluation-of-family-start.html)

<sup>22</sup> Livingstone, I. D. (2002). *Whanau Toko I Te Ora A Parenting Skills Programme: Evaluation Report to the Ministry of Education*. Ministry of Education, Wellington.

<sup>23</sup> Turner, M. (2006.) *Evaluation of Family Help Trust*. Family Help Trust, Christchurch.