



26 May 2023

Hon Julia Gillard AC  
Royal Commissioner into Early Education and Care  
GPO Box 11025  
Adelaide SA 5001

## RE: Submission to South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care – Engaging families effectively to improve opportunities for children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.

Dear Ms Gillard,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a written submission to the Royal Commission into Early Education and Care (ECEC) in South Australia, as part of the Royal Commission's second call for submissions.

Our submission specifically responds to the following focus areas of the Royal Commission:

- **First 1000 Days – How can service providers include parents and caregivers in education and information to support wellbeing and attachment in the early years?**
- **Other areas of the inquiry – What opportunities are there to innovate, redesign and codesign ECEC service models with communities to improve opportunities for families and children experiencing disadvantage?**

We focus on the importance of engaging families effectively to improve opportunities for children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. Our submission is in addition to and in support of the submission received by the Royal Commission from Prof Sharon Goldfeld and the Restacking the Odds initiative and Social Ventures Australia.

### About the Centre for Community Child Health

The [Centre for Community Child Health \(CCCH\)](#) is part of the world-class Melbourne Children's Campus, which unites community and clinical care, research, and education. CCCH a research group of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, a department of The Royal Children's Hospital, and an affiliate of the University of Melbourne's Department of Paediatrics. Our purpose is to **see every child thrive**. To achieve this, we have established a multidisciplinary team of researchers, paediatricians, managers, evaluators and educators with expertise in children's health, development and wellbeing. For over 25 years, the CCCH has worked collaboratively with families, communities, practitioners, organisations and decision makers to drive sustainable improvements in children's health, development and wellbeing.



## Engaging families effectively to improve opportunities for children and families experiencing disadvantage.

Our research shows that children who do not attend ECEC are significantly more likely to experience developmental vulnerability upon starting school.<sup>i</sup> This pattern remains even when considering the socioeconomic status of the communities in which a child lives, with over 20 percent of children living in disadvantaged communities, over 15 percent of children living on middle socioeconomic status communities, and over 10 percent of children living in the most advantaged communities, who did not attend ECEC experiencing developmental vulnerability.<sup>i</sup>

The barriers to attending ECEC have been well documented in the submission made by Prof Sharon Goldfeld and the research of the Restacking the Odds initiative. The submission by Social Ventures Australia also draws attention to the role integrated hubs can play in improving opportunities and outcomes for children and families experiencing disadvantage. Our submission specifically focuses on **effective family engagement and the fundamental importance of relationships for enhancing service delivery and child and family wellbeing** more broadly.

Convergent evidence indicates the quality of the relationships that professionals develop with parents and caregivers affects how effective they are as helpers and is central to achieving the objectives of services. Although the key elements of effective relationships are now well understood and eminently trainable, they are not necessarily easy to sustain and policy and practice change is needed to embed effective, consistent and predictable engagement and relational practices.

Effective engagement and relational practices are of particular importance for families experiencing vulnerability. For a variety of reasons, families experiencing the most vulnerabilities are the ones least likely to access and engage with services.<sup>ii</sup> Successfully engaging families facing multiple challenges or marginalisation is critical if we are to improve outcomes for them. The more vulnerable families are, the more important it is to establish effective relationships and enable service 'take up'.<sup>ii</sup> To strengthen the acceptability and efficacy of services, particularly for those experiencing vulnerability, there is also a need to involve parents and carers in service design, delivery and leadership.

More broadly, our submission draws on evidence underscoring the importance of relationships throughout our lives. The extent and quality of our relationships with others affect our health and well-being.<sup>iii iv v</sup> The more adverse a person's circumstance and the fewer resources they have, the more important it is for them to have secure supportive relationships with the people in their lives.<sup>vi vii</sup> Given the fundamental nature of relationships to both healthy development and effective help giving, there is a need to not only ensure service systems promote caring, relationship-based services (including spaces that act as social hubs and provide families with opportunities to connect with other families), but to also consider how we create community environments and conditions that enable positive social connections and relationships for families.



## Key recommendations for engaging families effectively

### Recommendation 1 - Build workforce, organisational and system capacity to deliver caring, relationship-based services.

This includes, but is not limited to:

- Training and supervision in the key skills of relational practice - we need a workforce trained in relational practice and supported by work environments that value and encourage caring services. The skills of effective help giving are well understood and eminently trainable.
- Developing practice guidelines that require parent participation in decision-making at all levels of service delivery.
- Funding outreach activities to find and build relationships with families who are isolated, marginalised or not currently accessing services and supports.
- Reconfiguring roles and job descriptions to enable purposive engagement and relationship building activities.
- Funding services that are predicated on evidence of partnerships with the parents who will benefit from the services.
- Transforming mental models about the nature of effective professional-parent helping relationships and the way in which services are designed and delivered.

The evidence and rationale for these recommendations is outlined in:

- Paper Two: Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability
- From consumer to partner: Rethinking the parent/practitioner relationship (Policy Brief)
- Authentic engagement: The nature and role of the relationship at the heart of effective practice.

### Recommendation 2 - Engage parents, families and communities as active partners in the design, delivery and leadership of services and places that are intended to benefit them.

Rather than governments and services making the decisions about what services are needed, what form they should take and where they should be located, these decisions need to be shared with the people who will use the services. Engaging parents, families and communities in the co-design and co-delivery of services and places enables them to feel comfortable and welcome and is necessary if we are to strengthen the acceptability and efficacy of services, particularly for those experiencing vulnerability. When designing or reconfiguring services for families and communities experiencing vulnerability, members of the community should be engaged throughout the process as co-designers and co-producers and have



meaningful involvement in decision making. Consideration should also be given to employing community members as co-workers.

This recommendation draws from the following sources:

- From consumer to partner: Rethinking the parent/practitioner relationship (Policy Brief)
- Paper Two: Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability
- Engaging and partnering with vulnerable families and communities: The keys to effective place-based approaches
- Community engagement: a key strategy for improving outcomes for Australian families

**Recommendation 3 - Recognise the fundamental importance of relationships for development and wellbeing and base the design and delivery of services – and community conditions – on relational practices.**

Relationships are vital for healthy development and functioning. We therefore need service systems that promote caring relationship-based services and positive social environments for families. Re-imagining integrated child and family centres as both social hubs - or natural and safe places within a community for families to connect with other families – and service hubs can help to respond to this need. However, we also need to consider how we create community environments and conditions that enable positive social connections and relationships for families and engage families and communities in designing solutions to this challenge.

Further evidence and rationale supporting this recommendation can be found in:

- Paper One: Core conditions for children and families: implications for integrated child and family services
- Paper Two: Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability
- Authentic engagement: The nature and role of the relationship at the heart of effective practice.

Thank you again for the opportunity to make a submission. We welcome the occasion to talk with the Royal Commission about our recommendations and look forward to the outcomes.

Warmest regards,

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Policy & Development Unit

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Policy & Equity





## References

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- <sup>i</sup> Goldfeld, et al, (2016). The role of preschool in promoting children's healthy development: Evidence from an Australian population cohort. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 35, 40-48 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2015.11.001>
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- <sup>iii</sup> Hawkley, L.C. and Cacioppo, J.T. (2013). Social connectedness and health, Ch. 12 in C. Hazan and M.I. and Campa (Eds) (2013). *Human Bonding: The Science of Affectional Ties*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- <sup>iv</sup> Lieberman, M.D. (2013). *Social: Why Our Brains are Wired to Connect*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- <sup>v</sup> Seeman, T. (2000) Health promoting effects of friends and family on health outcomes in older adults. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 14, 362-370. doi:10.4278/0890-1171-14.6.362
- <sup>vi</sup> Ungar, M. (2013). The impact of youth-adult relationships on resilience. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 4 (3), 328–336. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs43201312431>
- <sup>vii</sup> Ungar, M., Ghazinour, M. and Richter, J. (2013). Annual Research Review: What is resilience within the social ecology of human development? *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 54 (4), 348–366. doi: 10.1111/jcpp.12025