



Through their lens

An inquiry into non-parental education and care of infants and toddlers

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Summary report



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The full report can be found at

www.occ.org.nz/publications

Introduction

The Children's Commissioner has a statutory responsibility to be an independent advocate for children and to investigate matters affecting them. The infant and toddler age group currently has the fastest growing number of enrolments in formal non-parental early childhood services (ECS) in New Zealand. These increasing numbers warranted an inquiry into the impact on their well-being. The overall objective of this inquiry was to provide robust evidence-based information about the provision of formal ECS for under-2s, to analyse it from a child interest perspective, and to make recommendations on how it might be delivered in the best interests of infants and toddlers.

The child's perspective underpins this report. Guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), and in particular, Article 3 (best interests of the child should be a primary consideration) and Article 18 (parents and the State have joint responsibility for raising the child), issues relating to formal education and care were examined through the lens of the best interests of infants and toddlers.

The specific aims of the inquiry were:

- To set out what is known of current patterns in the use of formal education and care services for infants and toddlers
- To provide information about the known impacts, benefits, and risks on the physical, cognitive, social, emotional health and well-being of infants who spend time in formal childcare settings
- To identify regulatory aspects of the early childhood sector that may have an impact on infants and toddlers
- To report on the quality and accessibility of information available to parents who are choosing when and how to use formal care services for their infants and toddlers
- To identify the key policy and practice issues that arise from the findings
- To make recommendations to Ministers, government departments and sector organisations.

The report primarily draws on current knowledge from existing sources of data and literature and the perceptions of the respondents who participated in the consultation process. Although the findings are not generalisable beyond the specific participants, a variety of perspectives was sought to capture the diversity of New Zealand's early childhood services and the discourses on it.

Consultation was undertaken with (1) parents of infants and toddlers attending formal early childhood services and representing all types of provision offered in New Zealand; (2) chief executives and presidents of early childhood organisations and associations; (3) government officials and policy makers; (4) providers of centre and home-based services; (5) health professionals; (6) centre directors, professional leaders, supervisors and managers; (7) early childhood teachers; (8) nannies and home-based educators; (9) early childhood union representatives; (10) early childhood initial teacher educators; and (11) academics and researchers in early childhood. In addition, observation visits were made to a variety of early childhood settings that provide for infants and toddlers.

Theoretical perspectives

The child's perspective underpins this inquiry into the education and care of infants and toddlers. The child's perspective directs adults' attention to understanding the issues from the viewpoint of infants and toddlers. Sociocultural theory clarifies the concept of infant-toddler agency and how they come to know about their world through their activities, in communication with others (Smith, 2001; Smith & Taylor, 2000). Guided by Articles 3 and 18 of UNCROC, theoretical influences informing the philosophy are given effect using a dual socialisation model (Sommer, in press) to describe the modern context of interactions in both home and childcare environments. A set of "child's questions" (Podmore, May, & Carr, 2001) provide a link to the early childhood curriculum. Contemporary theories about brain development and attachment, in particular, provide a theoretical basis in relation to child development for under-2s. In addition, the right to education framework with its 4-A scheme is used to inform findings on usage and practice.

Policy settings

Children are any country's most valuable resource. Governments therefore have a keen interest in ensuring that young children are well cared for. Government takes responsibility for aspects of care, to varying degrees. Education is one such aspect, and for much of New Zealand's history government has taken responsibility for its provision from the age of six years to some time in adolescence. The policies about education and care before the age of six have been a matter of much more debate, and, over recent years, change.

The policy positions of the previous government administration are under review, in part for their cost and growth path and in part for some of the positions taken on universality and knowledge and skills requirements. If New Zealand is entering a further period of review, then the particular interests of infants and toddlers, the fastest growing group of users, must be given weight.

Complexity and incoherence

The first and obvious point to make about the policy and regulatory settings is their complexity. There are several players within central government policy, a very diverse set of providers, and government inputs into the sector through a complicated interacting mix of licensing, regulation, monitoring and funding incentives. This complexity is compounded by a lack of coherence across related policies and regulatory regimes. Parental leave policy appears to be quite separate from early education and care policy, and public health issues are separate from issues of educational development.

Funding

The funding of support for the care of infants and toddlers mirrors these divisions. Government policy and legislative changes in recent years to support families with young children have included: childcare subsidies for parents of under-five-year-olds; job protection through the Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987; paid parental leave under the Parental Leave and Employment Protection (Paid Parental Leave) Act 2002 (amended in 2004); tax credits towards the costs of raising children under the Working for Families package; and in 2007, 20 hours ECE funding of teacher-led education and care for three and four-year-olds.

Several aspects of the funding system merit comment from the perspective of infants and toddlers. The targeted support under Working for Families, and for those using the childcare subsidy, provide subsidies well into the middle-ranges of family incomes. Second, the paid parental leave provisions are limited and inflexible. Provisions in employment contracts may extend these provisions. Third, the subsidies for early childhood education and care costs paid to centres are not means tested and meet a considerable proportion of the actual costs (perhaps 50 percent) for six hours a day and 30 hours (5 days) a week. There is less flexibility around this funding than with the 20 hours highly subsidised regime for those over three years of age.

Policy settings in early childhood education and care provisions

The understandings and interpretations of policy positions relating to early childhood education and care used in this inquiry are as follows:

- ECS are non compulsory but there has been a strategy by governments to increase participation of 3 and 4-year-olds to effect 100 percent
- The services provided by non-government organisations; government policy is essentially agnostic to the nature of ownership and whether the provider is for profit or not
- In principle services are user pays but there is a very heavy government subsidy
- There is relatively extensive regulation but relatively light monitoring in respect of licensing and service quality
- There has been a strong commitment to services that contribute to the learning and development of three and four-year-olds.

Patterns of education and care

Early childhood is a growing sector, dominated by home and centre-based services, with an increasingly younger set of users whose parents are relatively well off and can afford to pay the fees. Children are there for longer periods of the day and week. In some areas, demand for early childhood services far exceeds the supply and in other areas there is a low participation rate. Ownership is increasingly in the hands of individuals and companies who are there, amongst other things, to get a return on their investment. Significantly for this study, the fastest areas of growth are home-based and centre-based education and care services for under two-year-olds.

Early childhood services are also changing their traditional types of provision to cater for the changing needs of their users. For example, some kindergartens have moved away from offering sessional services to providing all-day education and care. Kōhanga reo and Pasifika services that originally offered programmes aiming to grow the child's language and that of their parents, are now faced with the reality of needing to facilitate economic advancement by supporting mothers to study or work.

The shift towards ECS for under two-year-olds is a major change to the traditional patterns of education and care for three and four-year-olds. It reflects the demand for ECS to provide care while parents, usually mothers, return to paid work.

Not surprisingly, there are challenges. Evidence from this inquiry suggests that the provision of formal early childhood services for infants and toddlers is mixed in terms of the four "A" framework of the availability, accessibility, adaptability, and acceptability of those services. While factors such as long waiting lists clearly influence access by infants and toddlers and their families, attendance is also dependent on the family's background, geographical location, and income.

Impacts, benefits, risks, and mitigations of formal early childhood services

Impacts

One conclusion of a review of the literature on the impacts of formal ECS on infants and toddlers is that impacts are complicated to assess, given the importance of variables such as the quality of education and care provided in the home environment, the quality of the ECS service, individual child characteristics and different patterns of usage of formal, informal and parental care.

One well-supported conclusion, however, is that much of the impact is small, in particular when compared with the impact of home circumstances. The quality of parenting matters much more for under 2-year-olds (and indeed for older children), than ECS provisions. This does not mean that the impact of ECS is unimportant; or that risks and their mitigation do not matter. What we have found is significant for under 2-year-olds (and in particular for under 1-year-olds) in terms of impact, is duration in care, the numbers of carers and the standard of ECS provided. Therefore

questions remain about the impact and stress on infants of long hours of attendance in non-parental education and care.

Benefits

There are benefits of using ECS. It can allow for higher household incomes and this can materially benefit infants and toddlers. It can allow for parents' preferences about paid work and careers to be better fitted in with childcare responsibilities. It is likely that a happy rather than an unhappy parent benefits a child. These benefits have not been much researched or reported on in terms of direct benefit to the child.

The research literature confirms the benefits of formal early childhood education for three and four-year-olds and for children from disadvantaged families. However the evidence is not so clear for infants and toddlers except to demonstrate that "quality" is at the centre of all issues relating to the attendance of under-2s in formal ECS. In other words, whether the substitution of parental care for non-parental care results in an increase or decrease in child well-being depends on the quality of the care because high quality early childhood education and care is a key predictor for positive outcomes for young children.

Risks

Both the literature and the participants in this inquiry identified some risks in aspects of ECS for infants' and toddlers' optimal development. There is considerable debate about the degree of risk. Having said that, the inquiry has identified some risks that are well supported by the literature:

- Disrupted attachment as a result of long periods away from the primary family carer and/or disrupted attachment in formal ECS
- For under 1-year-olds, greater exposure to infection and subsequent illness at a time when immune and other response systems are underdeveloped.

These risks are heightened by long durations in non-parental care and low quality care. There is some evidence of risks of later behavioural problems from long duration in ECS at a young age but it is not as well established as those above. There has also been research into the risks of heightened levels of cortisol as a consequence of stressful ECS but the findings are varying and subject to much debate.

Mitigations

For infants and toddlers these findings suggest that what is in their best interests is:

- shorter rather than longer durations in ECS, in particular when they are under twelve months old
- higher quality ECS that pays good attention to the attachment and health risks and has settings, practices, and staff knowledge and skills consistent with reducing the risks.

Quality service provision matters. The quality of relationships can ameliorate the elevated risks around brain development and attachment. Mitigating the risk of attachment problems includes small group sizes, low staff/child ratios, the use of primary carers, and managed durations in care. Mitigating the health risk involves adequate space, a healthy physical environment, good practices and staff knowledge and access to advice. Paying attention to space requirements; adhering to safe and effective practices and routines; providing calm environments; nurturing sensitive, responsive and consistent relationships between infants and knowledgeable staff; obtaining health advice and strengthening monitoring regimes, are just some of the examples provided by participants on how to mitigate the risks for infants and toddlers in ECS.

Parental choice and decision-making

Most parents choose to re-enter the labour market because of the financial incentives of increasing the household income and to further their future career prospects. Many parents may not want to go back to work so soon after the birth of their baby but feel they have to in the interests of the family and their future. Childcare is viewed as a less than optimal consequence of the need to return to work.

This is not the perspective that derives from a child's interests framework or concepts of 'dual socialisation'. From those perspectives childcare is viewed not as a "necessary evil" but as an opportunity for a partnership between high quality ECS and parents in their infants' and toddlers' development.

A range of factors is at play in the choice of ECS. Parents of under-2s may choose a service provider that is open for longer periods of time or combine formal care

arrangements with informal care provided by extended family. Some families with a wide social network of friends in similar circumstances (for example, not working full-time) choose to share the care of their children, such as minding each other's children while the other works and vice versa. Others might want their child to be cared for by people from their own culture, such as in a kōhanga reo or Pasifika service with people speaking the same first language. Similarly, families of minority cultures might choose a more multicultural service in their belief that the staff and children will be better accepting of their child. Some may even seek out services that already have children attending who are from the same country as their family.

Many families in this inquiry considered their choice to be very constrained by factors other than their preference. Fees charged by service providers affect parental choice, as does the availability of places or the convenience of the location. Some parents were aware that in selecting one type of service provision they were trading off elements of quality over others. For example, parents choosing home-based education and care prioritised small group size over qualified teachers.

Whatever their reasons for choosing home-based or centre-based education and care, participating parents were comfortable with the choices they made. This finding is supported by earlier research studies. Holloway and Fuller (1992) wrote that while parents might be able to articulate problems within the state of childcare, they still tend to feel comfortable with their own arrangements.

Parental choice of childcare does not inevitably lead to high quality education and care, as defined by the research literature and the early childhood professionals in this inquiry. This is because many parents are not fully aware of the learning and developmental needs of their infants and of the importance of responsive relationships as a crucial aspect of quality.

Quality early childhood services for under-2s

While various interrelated factors contribute to quality practice, the literature and professionals' evidence was that the key elements of quality education and care for under-2s are: high adult to child ratios; small group sizes; staff education, qualifications and skills; positive, sensitive and responsive caregiving; superior physical environments with well-defined indoor and outdoor spaces; significant

parental involvement; attention to health and safety; and effective pedagogy via a socially, culturally and developmentally appropriate curriculum.

Parents' perceptions of quality education and care tended to be more basic, with an emphasis on physical surroundings and the quality of the emotional responses of the caregivers. There was recognition by the early childhood professionals, confirmed in the literature review, that structural and regulatory elements set up the conditions for quality practice, and that the quality of interactions between practitioners and individual infants and toddlers was crucial.

The participants in this inquiry reported examples of exceptional practices alongside examples of poor quality education and care. This is consistent with ERO reports. This report therefore sets out the concerns raised about quality and recommends that Ministers and their officials consider the adequacy of some current monitoring regimes.

Discussion

The findings of this inquiry need to be set in the wider context of issues of availability, access, acceptability, and adaptability. There are issues of availability that arise out of the distribution of early childhood services. There is an under-supply of centre-based services for infants and toddlers generally and especially in areas of low-income households. Access to services is also limited by the cost of the service, and for some, a question of acceptability from a cultural perspective. The inquiry also found some inflexibility in service provision that reduced adaptability to infants' and parents' needs.

The discussion on impact, risk and benefits focuses on risks for infants and notes that while quality formal non-parental education and care is not harmful, and may benefit some children, there are risks to be managed. These risks are of exposure too early to infections and of disrupted attachment. These can be mitigated by managing durations in formal education and care at a very young age, good health practices, and relationships between carers and children well attuned to the individual child.

The key policy implications of the findings are in support of:

- Policies that support parental care in the first 12 months of life
- Policy settings that allow for flexible use of formal ECS for under-2s
- Policy and regulatory settings that support quality provisions
- Policies that support provisions of early childhood education and care services by a knowledgeable and skilled workforce

The key practice implications are supportive of:

- Quality education and care
- Practices that enhance responsive relationships
- Education and professional learning that increase knowledge about and skilled work with infants and toddlers
- Better management of the health-related interests of infants and toddlers

Conclusions

This inquiry has concluded that the interests of infants and toddlers could be better taken account of in the current policies, regulations, and practices around both support for parental care and support for non-parental education and care. While the inquiry did not find formal non-parental education and care was inimical to the interests of infants and toddlers, or find widespread and serious deficiencies in the quality of the formal non-parental care provided, this does not mean that change is not needed.

There is much to admire in early childhood policies, curriculum and practice for young children in New Zealand, including a strong emphasis on what is in children's interests. Overall, however, this report finds that greater emphasis needs to be given to the particular needs of infants and toddlers. There should be more support for parental care of those under 12 months, some tightening up of important quality standards in the provision of formal non-parental care for infants and toddlers, and greater attention to the knowledge and skills needed to work with under 2-year-olds in the education and professional learning of those who work with them.

These findings are made in a context in which many parents feel they do not have a choice about returning early to work, or that their choice is very constrained and determined by factors other than their preference. These findings should not be construed as a criticism of working mothers. Society has changed. Working mothers and consequently non-maternal childcare are part of this change. The inquiry on which this report is based has concluded that formal ECS should be seen as a contribution, in partnership with parents and often extended family members, to a child's learning and development.

As a signatory to UNCROC, New Zealand has a legal obligation to consider the best interests of children in its policies. If this is to be done well, some changes need to be made to the current set of policies, regulations and practices around support for parental and non-parental care of infants and toddlers. The recommendations in this report set out a pathway to achieve those changes.

Recommendations

This report recommends a review of the policy settings across paid parental leave provisions as well as childcare provisions. The aim of the review should be to make recommendations that will tip the incentives and supports towards parental and extended family care of very young infants.

A related area of change is to provide for greater flexibility in the provision of ECS, to meet the interests of infants and toddlers in part-time use of formal early childhood services. There is some evidence that the current set of policies, regulations and funding incentives are leading to rigidity in provision and less choice for parents rather than flexibility.

The second area of recommendations for change concerns quality. This is consistent with the conclusion of this report that the regulatory regime, the education and support services and the monitoring of practices for under 2-year-olds falls short of what is in their best interests. The regulatory regime has minimum standards that are too low; the infant and toddler content in teacher education programmes is too meagre; and this report confirms the more extensive ERO report that quality standards are too low in too many services.

This inquiry has not included the detailed work that would lead to specific and costed recommendations. That is the work of government's officials. However, taxpayers make a very large investment in the education and care of infants and toddlers, specifically through paid parental leave provisions and subsidies for early childhood education and care services. The most recent investments, valid enough in their own right, have gone to enhance services to three and four-year-olds. The main effects, it would seem, have been to reduce the fees to the existing user population and fund the higher costs of increasing the proportions of qualified teachers.

The government has already embarked on some re-prioritisation of that expenditure to meet goals of greater support for early childhood education and care for young children in low income, Māori and Pasifika households. Some of the recommendations made here have cost implications that could be met by further re-prioritisation in the interests of infants and toddlers.

The following recommendations are couched as proposals that current policy and regulatory settings, or current practices, be reviewed, or that new settings or practices be considered. The recommendations are addressed to the responsible Minister or to the agency that would lead such work.

Policies that support parental care in the first 12 months of life

- 1 It is recommended that the Minister of Education and the Minister of Labour direct their officials, in consultation with other officials as appropriate, to:
 - review current policies for paid parental leave and funding of early childhood education and care to identify the balance of incentives provided for parental care and formal non-parental care
 - provide advice on increasing the quantum and flexibility of support for parental care
 - provide advice on the merits of having ECS funding attached to the individual child rather than tied to types of provision and paid to providers.

Policies, regulatory settings and funding structures that allow for flexible use of formal non-parental early childhood education and care services by infants and toddlers

- 2 It is recommended that the Minister of Education direct her officials to:
 - review policy, regulatory and funding settings for their impact on flexible provision of hours and days of attendance for infants and toddlers
 - provide advice on changes that would improve access to part-time and flexible education and care for infants and toddlers.

Policies and regulatory settings that support quality services provision for infants and toddlers

- 3 It is recommended that the Minister of Education note the conclusion of this report, that several regulated minimum standards are set too low in aspects of service quality that are important for infants and toddlers.
- 4 It is recommended that the Minister of Education direct her officials to provide advice on:
 - making a regulation that limits group size to no more than eight under two-year-olds for purposes of supporting responsive and stimulating interactions
 - reducing the regulated minimum ratio of adults to children for under two-year-olds from 1:5 to 1:3 in ECEC centres and from 1:4 to 1:3 for home-based educators caring for children where two are aged less than two years
 - increasing the regulated minimum space for under 2-year-olds from 2.5 m² to 3 m²
 - supporting ECS to give effect to the inclusion of quiet spaces in the design and layout of their premises and the provision of acoustic absorption materials, if necessary, to reduce noise levels that may negatively affect young children's learning and well-being.

Policies that support the provision of early childhood education and care services to infants and toddlers by a knowledgeable and skilled workforce

- 5 It is recommended that the Minister of Education direct her officials to:
- report on the extent to which services to infants and toddlers in licensed ECS are provided by qualified and registered teachers, and any trends that are occurring
 - provide advice on the extent to which changes are a consequence of the recent regulatory and funding changes and on any remedial changes that are necessary
 - provide advice on amending the regulations in mixed age settings to apply the minimum of 50 percent of qualified, knowledgeable, and skilled staff to service provision in the under-2 area.

Practices that enhance responsive education and care

- 6 It is recommended that the Minister of Education:
- note that the issues about quality of service reported by ERO in 2010 are confirmed in this inquiry
 - note that the relicensing process will not address these concerns for many infants and toddlers who will use services over the next three years
 - direct officials, in consultation with ERO, to advise how improvements to practice quality might be more quickly achieved.

Education and professional learning

- 7 It is recommended that the Minister of Education:
- note the role of education and professional learning in addressing quality issues for the learning and development of infants and toddlers

- encourage a focus on current and up-to-date professional learning in areas where it could make a contribution to infants and toddlers
 - reconsider the decision to cease practitioner research initiatives such as the Centres of Innovation that help to improve the quality of provision to under-2s
 - direct officials to provide advice on the merits of amending regulations to require qualified staff providing services to infants and toddlers to have obtained, or be obtaining, specific professional learning on working with under-2s
 - direct officials to review the regulations and funding settings of home-based educators with a view to enhancing the levels of knowledge and skills expected of carers and levels of support provided by their employers.
- 8 It is recommended that the Minister of Education direct her officials to provide advice, in consultation with the New Zealand Teachers Council, on how to:
- encourage teacher education providers to review their initial teacher education programmes to ensure they provide adequate content specific to infants and toddlers
 - support teacher education providers to offer postgraduate papers and qualifications on infant-toddler specialisation.

Improved management of health interests of infants and toddler in formal education and care

- 9 It is recommended that the Minister of Education and Minister of Health direct their officials, in consultation with other agencies as appropriate, to:
- set up a process for health sector engagement in policy development, regulation and operational planning for formal non-parental ECS at national and regional levels
 - provide advice on the merits of allowing registered health professionals with appropriate qualifications to count as

additional qualified staff for the purposes of early childhood regulatory and funding requirements

- provide advice on ways to increase the engagement of primary health professionals in early childhood services
- review the adequacy of the monitoring regimes for health standards in formal non-parental education and care.

Information to support parents' decision-making

10 It is recommended that the Minister of Education direct her officials to:

- review the information for parents on the Ministry of Education website for early childhood to enhance the information for parents of infants and toddlers on the aspects of quality in ECS important to their child's stage of learning and development
- improve parents' access to information by making the Ministry of Education website resources and information about parents' choices and elements of quality in ECS more widely available through links to other websites (e.g., Department of Labour) and in community settings frequented by parents (e.g., Well-Child providers, Plunket, doctors' surgeries, public libraries).

