

The *A good beginning report*: Implications for Australia

For many years we have tended to think being 'school-ready' involved children starting school with a range of pre-academic skills, particularly pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills. However, the acknowledgement that social competence is an important factor in childhood development, contributing significantly to overall outcomes, is now becoming more widespread.



Social competence 'refers to a person's ability to get along with other people. Children's social competence is affected by how well they communicate with other children and with adults' (Illinois Early Learning, 2008). In recognition of this, the Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network in Chicago commissioned a paper - the *A good beginning report* - aimed at closing the gap between research and policy: reviewing the evidence and making recommendations as to the appropriate interventions (Peth-Pierce, 2008).

Peth-Pierce cites American research indicating that as many as 46 per cent of kindergarten teachers reported nearly half of the children starting their class had specific problems in transitioning to school, with many lacking the basic social and emotional skills necessary to adapt to the school environment.

SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN AUSTRALIA

In Australia, the roll-out of the Australian Early Development Index gives us an opportunity to examine the 'school readiness' of our young children. The index measures, among other things, social knowledge and competence. Children who are identified as developmentally vulnerable in this area have poor overall social skills, low self-confidence, rarely engage in cooperative play with peers or show curiosity about the world, and tend not to engage with new activities, toys and books.

The numbers of children around the country identified as vulnerable in this area vary from a low of 1.9 per cent to a high of 22.2 per cent (Centre for Community Child Health and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2007). The Australian Early Development Index also measures emotional maturity, including children's pro-social and helping behaviour, levels of anxious, fearful and aggressive behaviours, and levels of hyperactivity and inattention. The Australian data indicates a low of 2.8 per cent of children identified as developmentally vulnerable in this area, to a high of 15.4 per cent. Given that we know children 'who are socially and emotionally ready for school generally have improved school outcomes, better odds of later school and vocational success, better later social and emotional development' (Peth-Pierce, 2008, p. 2), this is of great concern.

Social and emotional competence develops through children's first years of life and the relationships they develop with their families and others around them. Research (Hutchins & Sims, 1999) has clearly demonstrated the benefits associated with strong parent-child relationships and we now know that strong relationships with other carers involved in children's lives also have a major impact on their outcomes.

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STRATEGIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Peth-Pierce summarises a range of successful interventions all of which are familiar to Australian researchers and practitioners. Head Start, with its combination of educational, health, nutrition and social services provided through high-quality centre-based programs for children and parents (as well as home-based programs for families), consistently demonstrates positive outcomes. But despite this, Head Start only serves 50 per cent of eligible children and families, and Early Head Start (working with children from birth to three years and their families) only services 2 per cent of eligible families.

While there are a range of other, mainly small, demonstration programs, Peth-Pierce points out that these 'create only a patchwork system of early childhood care, implemented across many domains, and can not be relied upon to ensure the social and emotional school readiness of the nation's children' (Peth-Pierce, 2008, p. 14).

The situation in Australia is no better. Our expenditure on programs for the early years is particularly poor, and, despite gallant attempts in a number of jurisdictions to offer holistic supports to young children and their families, service delivery remains piecemeal. In recognition of this, many have welcomed the Prime Minister's development of parent-child centres.

International research (McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007) has clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of interventions offering both high-quality centre-based programs for children, and a range of centre- and home-based supports for families. We have an opportunity in Australia to benefit from the experiences of others and develop supports for young children and their families that have the potential to change the shape of our society and country in years to come.

The experiences of Sure Start in the United Kingdom tell us that it is important that these centres are in 'pushchair walking distance' to all families. Quality centre-based programs for children might include any combination of long day care, family day care, occasional care, outside school hours care, vacation care and/or playgroups where staff are selected and highly skilled and have low child-staff ratios.

Family support programs might include any services relevant to the needs of the local community. Experiences with Multi-functional Aboriginal Children Services in Australia (Sims et al., 2008) indicate the need in many communities to provide transport to enable families to get to the Centre and its programs.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Over the next few years we face exciting challenges to develop a new range of services and the necessary infrastructure and supporting services to ensure they operate effectively. There are no easy answers to any of the challenges Peth-Pierce reminds us that we face, but it will be our own willingness to tackle the difficult times ahead that will shape our future as a people and a nation.


Associate Professor Margaret Sims

Head, Centre for Social Research
Edith Cowan University

m.sims@ecu.edu.au

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