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Victoria Best and Fairest



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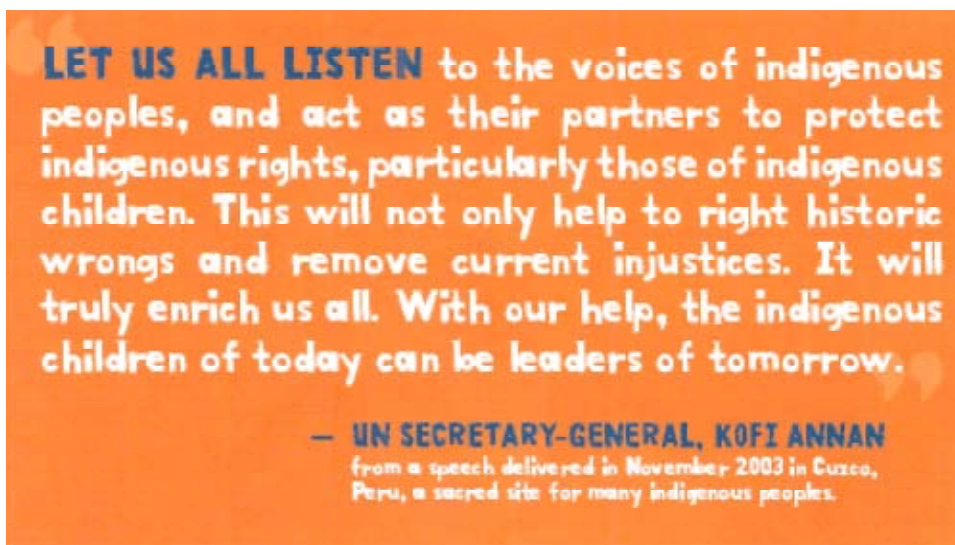
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Children and Families



Investing in children's early years, giving parents the help they need to raise their families and ensuring our most vulnerable children and vulnerable young people receive the support they need – when they need it – are amongst the most important things that this Government can do.¹

There is now overwhelming evidence that investment in children's early years translates into giant leaps in their life opportunities, and to a stronger economy with less spending on welfare, crime, and ill health.

VCOSS has welcomed the significant improvements and investment in early childhood policy made during the last two terms of government, and particularly welcomes the new Premier's commitment to continuing a focus on the early years.

To best support their wellbeing, children, young people and families need to be able to access support services when they need them, including services aimed at prevention and early intervention.²

These services need to focus on reinforcing children's, and families' strengths.

The recent establishment of the new Department for Education and Early Childhood Development, and the associated machinery of government changes, both creates some challenges as well new opportunities to further improve outcomes for children. A key challenge will be ensuring that early intervention primary services have strong links to secondary and tertiary services.

There will also be significant opportunities to drive improved linkages across all early childhood services, including early childhood education and care services.

Four priorities in children's services for 2008-09 include:

1. achieving improved outcomes for Indigenous children and families
2. strengthening early year's services through better integration across the early childhood service system and improved continuity of care;
3. a stronger early intervention response for children with additional developmental needs; and
4. strengthened early intervention family support services.

Indigenous children and families

Indigenous children continue to have poorer health and wellbeing than non-Indigenous children. This is exacerbated by services that aren't meeting Indigenous children's needs:

- Aboriginal children and families continue to be under-represented in universal and preventative services, including family services;
- very few service responses for older children and young adolescents or therapeutic services to assist vulnerable Aboriginal families are in place; and
- services that are available don't meet the specific needs of Aboriginal children, young people, and families because of the lack of sufficient Aboriginal-specific family services and culturally responsive generalist services.³

Too many Indigenous families receive no support until issues reach crisis point.

Important initiatives in Victoria including the development of the *Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework*,⁴ and programs designed to improve outcomes for Indigenous children and young people are welcome. VCOSS has also welcomed the Government's identification of improving outcomes for Indigenous children as a priority.⁵

However, further investment is required in targeted approaches in all support services.

Successfully addressing children's disadvantage requires approaches that are rights based, culture based and strengths based and which reorient service delivery to a focus on prevention and early intervention.⁶

Healing the community needs to happen before we can move forward and pass on positive cultural heritage. We need to get back to the basics: nurturing, self-discipline, modelling, the drive to keep going under great difficulty. Aboriginal families often are not able to provide that, because they haven't been taught it.⁷

Capacity of Aboriginal-controlled organisations

Alongside increased investment in services, there is a critical need to strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal-controlled organisations to enable them to both better meet the needs of their communities and to be able to resource their partnerships with generalist organisations.

Aboriginal controlled organisations suffer from a lack of economies of scale, like all small agencies, but in addition, Aboriginal organisations also experience specific issues, including:

- higher levels of disadvantage in the Indigenous community;
- representational role demands on both individuals and agencies;
- the generally lower skill base available for boards and staff; and
- high and/or unrealistic community expectations.

In strengthening the capacity of Aboriginal-controlled organisations, it is important that a broad approach is taken and not simply a focus on social support or welfare services. One unintended consequence of a welfare-only response is that it focuses only on problems and defines Indigenous communities in a negative frame – yet cultural issues are far wider than this.

Culturally appropriate generalist services

Generalist organisations' policy and program responses also need to be strengthened to ensure they provide culturally sensitive practice. There are three essential components in strengthening the capacity of generalist organisations and their staff to engage with Indigenous communities:

1. building cultural competence at the organisation and individual level;
2. cultural awareness training; and
3. building sustainable and equal partnerships with Aboriginal-controlled organisations that value and respect Indigenous Australian culture, skills and knowledge.

VCOSS supports the development of a cultural competency framework that generalist organisations are required to meet. Focused resources are required for:

- generalist organisations for training and resource tools to enable the development of cultural competence across the organisation; and



- Aboriginal organisations to enable them to assist generalist organisations in developing cultural competence.

Improved integration across early childhood services

Early childhood education and care services, from the prenatal period to the first years of school, are now well-recognised as critical to supporting children's healthy development and for their development as healthy, well functioning adults.⁸

To function effectively the spectrum of services that respond to infants, children and parents need to work much closer together. These linkages are the key to ensuring that vulnerable children don't fall through the net.

Strong linkages are required between:

- universal services offered to all children, such as maternal and child health, playgroups, early education and care services and primary schools;
- specialist early intervention services that assist children with developmental delays and/or a disability and general family support services;
- secondary support services, such as more intensive family support services; and
- tertiary end intensive services, such as Family Support Innovations Projects, foster and residential care services.

Clear actions are required to break down the historic structures, traditional rivalries and professional boundaries between early childhood education, health, and care professionals.

To strengthen linkages across services, funding is required for the development of virtual children's hubs, where a wide range of support services for families and children collaborate to provide coordinated services. As part of a focus on improving linkages across services, there is an opportunity to expand the Kindergarten Cluster Management model into

broader Early Childhood Services Clusters. These clusters should focus on integration across the full range of early childhood services, including offering training, networking and mentoring without requiring participating services to surrender the ownership and governance of their services.

Also critical, is both the recognition of the importance of including childcare within initiatives aimed at better integration of children's services, and ensuring improved access to kindergarten. VCOSS has warmly welcomed the Government's Children's Centres funding initiative, but has concerns at recent moves to approve capital funding for Children's Centres that do not incorporate childcare.

VCOSS has also welcomed recent initiatives to improve access to kindergarten, including the expansion of the Koori Early Childhood Education Program and the increase in the Kindergarten Fee Subsidy. The OECD report *Starting strong*, noted that too many Australian children aged three and four are being left behind at an age critical for brain development.⁹ Strategies that address the range of barriers to participation in kindergarten, such as geographic location and lack of transport, are required.

In addition to improved service linkages, concentrated effort is required to improve linkages and collaboration both within the new department, and between the new department and the Department of Human Services. Resources are required to support the implementation of the machinery of government changes in partnership with affected sector organisations. A strong emphasis is required on ensuring that early childhood education, care and health services are affordable, accessible, high quality and responsive to children and families' needs.

Early intervention services for children with additional development needs

Timely access to early intervention services is also critical for the wellbeing of children with additional development needs to ensure they are able to reach their full potential. Currently, this access continues to be limited, with children facing long waiting lists for paediatric allied health and counselling services, and for specialist intervention services.

VCOSS welcomed the additional resources for enhanced early intervention in the 2007-08 Budget. However, this increase does not address the historical legacy of massive under-resourcing of early intervention services for children with a disability by successive state governments in both the number of places and the quantum of hours of support.

VCOSS welcomes the inquiry currently being undertaken into early childhood intervention

services, and we have positive expectations that recommendations from this inquiry will be resourced in the 2008-09 Budget.

Extra effort is necessary to better integrate children with additional needs into mainstream early childhood education and care services, as this benefits both the individual child in terms of their social and educational development, and the social development of other children. Currently, access to the Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services is too restrictive, and children with additional development needs are being excluded because of the strict eligibility guidelines. This places enormous pressures on families, children, staff and committees, and hinders the individual child's development.

Family support services

Families play a central role in nurturing, caring and protecting their children. In many instances, families often need focused support to provide the best care, particularly families that are vulnerable. Family support services provide this support to parents, helping to reduce parental stress, improve parenting skills and confidence, and strengthen parent-child relationships. To be most effective, vulnerable families need to be connected to the support services they need as early as possible, and for as long as required.

The new Child FIRST model has significant potential to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families. The establishment of a central intake point and coordination of a wide range of local, integrated, community-based services is a positive initial step. These linkages are proving ever more important, as more families are presenting with a combination of complex issues, including poverty, mental health, family violence and substance abuse. In the last five years, the proportion of parents presenting with two or more of these issues grew from 9 to 44 per cent.¹⁰

However, continued under-funding of family support services, particularly early intervention supports, remains one of the key factors undermining improved outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and families.¹¹ As Dr Jack Shonkoff has identified, 'toxic stress' arising from poverty, abuse and neglect, maternal depression and substance abuse needs to be addressed directly at the early stages to prevent damage to children.¹²

The current heightened financial hardship being experienced by many families as a result of the drought and increased housing cost, further highlights the urgent need for more early intervention family support services, particularly generalist counselling services.

The focus on earlier intervention for families assessed as most vulnerable in the reforms has meant that vulnerable families that do not meet the eligibility threshold for accessing family services through the new Child FIRST are receiving few supports. Further, like the Family Support Innovations Projects, Child FIRST is identifying additional need for which there is currently no capacity to respond – for example, the number of new referrals in Child FIRST catchments rose by 34 per cent across the State in the post-implementation period when compared with referrals in the previous quarter.¹³

A further concern with the Child FIRST model is the lack of proper resourcing of collaborations and partnering. A key learning from the Family Support Innovations Projects is that the networks that help ensure improved integration require additional resources to both establish and maintain.¹⁴ However, existing resource levels are not adequate for either the initial or ongoing network development. VCOSS supports the adoption of a similar model for these networks as that used in the Primary Care Partnerships, where funding is included for networking and linking.

Recommendations

- 1 VCOSS proposes the Government better support and promote the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, young people and families by:
 - a. expanding Aboriginal-specific early intervention family support services;
 - b. ensuring Aboriginal Child FIRST Workers are present in each Child FIRST program;
 - c. establishing Aboriginal-specific counselling and casework services for Indigenous young people;
 - d. providing targeted resources and programs to support Aboriginal kinship carers; and
 - e. developing responses to family violence that focus on the whole family, and include engagement and counselling of children.
- 2 VCOSS proposes that the Government strengthen Aboriginal-controlled organisations by better resourcing training, infrastructure development and research and evaluation.
- 3 VCOSS proposes that the Government strengthen the capacity of generalist services to provide culturally appropriate services to the Indigenous community by:
 - a. resourcing generalist organisations to meet cultural competence standards; and
 - b. resourcing Aboriginal organisations to enable them to assist generalist organisations in developing cultural competence.
- 4 VCOSS proposes that the Government strengthen integration across early childhood services by:
 - a. investing in training, networking and mentoring across professional groups working with young children;
 - b. redesigning service funding to promote integration;
 - c. ensuring child care services remain integrated into Children's Centres;
 - d. expanding the Kindergarten Cluster Management model to become Early Childhood Services Clusters;
 - e. addressing the range of barriers to participation in kindergarten, such as geographic location, through such strategies as improving linkages between kindergarten and long day care; and
 - f. resourcing the implementation of the machinery of government changes in partnership with affected sector organisations to ensure that early childhood education, care, support and health services are affordable, accessible, high quality and responsive to children's and families' needs.
- 5 VCOSS proposes that the Government better support the learning and development needs of children with additional developmental needs by:
 - a. increasing investment in specialist services for children with additional developmental needs, particularly paediatric allied health and counselling services;
 - b. increasing investment in early childhood intervention services to both increase the number of places available and the hours of support provided;
 - c. introducing and resourcing new mechanisms for children with additional developmental needs to attend three year old kindergarten programs; and
 - d. increasing funding for the Kindergarten Inclusion Support Service and extend the current guidelines and definition of 'eligible' children.
- 6 VCOSS proposes that the Government better promote the safety and development of vulnerable children by increasing investment in both early intervention and secondary family support services, particularly in rural and regional areas.
- 7 VCOSS proposes that the Government better support families in rural and regional areas experiencing drought related hardship by providing three year funding for generalist counselling services in all drought declared areas of Victoria.
- 8 VCOSS proposes that additional funding is provided within the Child FIRST model for the development and maintenance of networks, similar to the model used for Primary Care Partnerships.



Endnotes

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- 5 Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Victoria's plan to improve outcomes in early childhood: National Reform Agenda*, State of Victoria, 2007, p.3.
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- 13 Department of Human Services, *Family Services Quarterly Report, 23 April to 30 June 2007*, Department of Human Services, Melbourne, 2007.
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