

COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS'  
National Reform Agenda

# Tasmania's Early Childhood and Child Care Action Plan

April 2007



Tasmania  
Explore the possibilities

Tasmania's Jurisdictional Action Plan for Early Childhood and Child Care

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## FOREWORD

All parents want the best for their children, to see them grow up to achieve their potential as individuals and as productive members of the community, contributing to their own and Australia's future prosperity.

As part of the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) 10-year National Reform Agenda, all Australian Governments have agreed to find ways to make Australia's population healthier and better educated, leading to long term improvements in workforce participation and economic prosperity.

This paper sets out Tasmania's Jurisdiction Action Plan (JAP) to improve the health, development and learning outcomes of our youngest children so we can raise living standards into the future.

Babies begin learning from at least the moment of birth, if not before. They take on more new learning in the first three or four years than they do for the rest of their lives. This is where we can make the biggest difference, particularly for our most needy and vulnerable children.

The Commonwealth Government has a critical role to play in working together with the Tasmanian Government to do our best for children aged 5 years and under. The Commonwealth Government is the major beneficiary of financial benefits from improved national productivity. With the financial support of the Commonwealth Government there are a range of actions the JAP recommends that will enable the Tasmanian Government to implement more reforms more quickly and make the biggest difference for our children.

Tasmania's JAP to improve outcomes in early childhood sets out a framework for reform within three policy directions set by COAG:

- improving antenatal care;
- strengthening the health, development and learning of 0-5 year olds; and
- enhancing the provision of early childhood education and care services.

The JAP shows the Tasmanian Government's commitment to the wellbeing of our young children, and draws on the *Early Years Framework for Action*. The *Framework* has been developed by the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services in discussions with early childhood service providers. Many of the actions contained in the JAP are part of *Launching into Learning*, which is a new government initiative to support children's early learning and prepare them for going to school.

Since the COAG announced the National Reform Agenda in February 2006, my Government has committed \$17.5 million over four years on new initiatives in the early years.

Investing in new initiatives to secure the wellbeing of children in the most important years of their lives is a priority for my Government. I am looking for a similar level of collaboration and support from the Commonwealth Government to take forward COAG's National Reform Agenda for all children in their early years.



Paul Lennon  
**Premier**

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# 1. THE COAG NATIONAL REFORM AGENDA

## 1.1 Setting the Agenda for Human Capital Reform

In February 2006, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to a new wave of national reform known as the COAG National Reform Agenda (NRA).

Due to the ageing of our population and the increasing competitiveness of the global economy, Australia is facing challenges in the coming decades. The NRA is a commitment by all Australian Governments to meet those challenges by working together over the next 10 years to drive continued economic prosperity for all Australians and improve our standard of living in the decades ahead.

Previous reforms have focused on making Australia's economy more competitive and reducing the red tape burden on businesses. While this continues to be a focus in the NRA, there is a new emphasis on providing Australians with the opportunities and choices they need to lead active and productive lives. It recognises that a healthy, skilled and motivated population is critical to improved workforce participation and productivity.

Human capital reform is about improving health, learning and work outcomes for all Australians. It is not within the power of just one government. Success will rely on all governments taking a long-term perspective and finding new ways to work together to support local solutions and responses while maximising the benefits of reform across the Australian community.

## 1.2 The Importance of the Early Childhood Years for Building Human Capital

In recent years, research from a wide variety of disciplines has shown that investing in early childhood offers exceptional economic and social returns in terms of the development of human capital and increased workforce participation and productivity<sup>1</sup>.

Across the world there is increasing recognition that the right kind of support in the first few years of life sets the foundation for learning, behaviour and health through the school years and into adult life.

Research shows that 75% of a child's brain develops during the first five years of their life, and half of all intellectual and developmental potential of a child is established by age four<sup>2</sup>.

Children's life chances, especially for those born into disadvantaged families, are strongly shaped before they begin school. Confronting early disadvantage is far more effective than seeking to remedy disadvantage later in life.

Many intractable problems faced by young children and parents are uniquely associated with adverse maternal health related behaviours during pregnancy, dysfunctional care-giving, and stressful environmental conditions that interfere with parental and family functioning.

These problems include infant mortality, premature births, low birth weight and neuro-developmental impairments in young children, resulting from poor conditions for pregnancy, child abuse and neglect, accidental childhood injuries, youth violence, closely spaced pregnancies and thwarted economic self sufficiency of parents.<sup>3</sup>

A focus on prevention and early intervention during pregnancy and the early years of a child's life can improve the quality of life for vulnerable children, and help all children achieve their full potential.

A child that has a good start in life is likely to be happy, healthy and an able learner; and as an adult, to be independent and contribute to the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Karoly, L.A., Greenwood, P.W., Everingham, S.S., Hoube, J., Kilburn, M.R., Rydell, C.P., Sanders, M. & Chiesa, J. 1998. *Investing in our children: What we know and don't know about the costs and benefits for early childhood interventions*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, C.A.

<sup>2</sup> McCain and Mustard, 1999. *Reversing the Real Brain Drain: Early Years Study*

<sup>3</sup> Olds, D. 2006. The Nurse-Family Partnership: an evidence base preventative intervention. *Infant Mental Health Journal*. Vol 27. 1. pp.5-25.

### 1.3 Cost Effectiveness of Investing in the Early Years of Life

Investment in quality early years programs for young children and their families can improve individual health, wellbeing and productivity, and result in benefits that accumulate over a lifetime. Wherever children end up they will become contributing members of their communities, participants in civic life. These investments benefit individuals, families and the wider community – immediately and into the future.

There is now broad consensus around the world from economists and experts of all political persuasions that investing in primary prevention and early childhood development programs has substantial payoffs. Investment in such programs easily pays for itself over time by generating very high rates of return for participants and their families, the public and government<sup>4</sup>.

Evidence is available from four long-term follow-up studies of participants in quality early childhood development programs in the United States, with economic analysis demonstrating cost-benefit ratios ranging from 3.78:1 in the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention program to 12.90:1 in the Perry Preschool Project<sup>5</sup>.

Analysis of this evidence has convinced a number of influential economists to conclude that investment in this area is crucial to human development and should be a high priority for governments:

*Early childhood investments of high quality have lasting effects...We cannot afford to postpone investing in children until they become adults, nor can we wait until they reach school age – a time when it may be too late to intervene.*

James Heckman, Nobel Prize winning economist, University of Chicago 1999

*Society pays in many ways for failing to take full advantage of the learning potential of its children, from lost economic productivity and tax revenues to higher crime rates and diminished participation in the civic and cultural life of the nation...The evidence has grown even stronger that investment in early education can have long term benefits for both children and society.*

Committee for Economic Development, New York, 2002

Investment in quality antenatal and early childhood programs, particularly where these are integrated across a range of services, contributes to improved life-long outcomes including better academic performance, higher workforce participation and higher earnings. Long-term outcomes also include reductions in criminality, health inequalities and demands on social services, with these benefits being greatest among disadvantaged children and their families.

The research evidence indicates that strategies which support positive parenting and make family environments less stressful, including programs that enhance secure attachment between parent and infant in the first years of life, can produce sustainable positive outcomes for social and cognitive development.

At the last analysis Australia expends 0.1 per cent of GDP on pre-primary education. This is a very low ranking (17<sup>th</sup> out of 20) on OECD comparative tables<sup>6</sup>. In considering the cost-benefit of early intervention programs, it is useful to look at the costs incurred when governments and societies fail to support their children appropriately. Major expenditures will be incurred in a number of areas, the most costly of which is crime, with estimates of total economic cost of crime in Australia put at over 40 per cent of GDP<sup>7</sup>.

However, it should be noted that the benefits and savings from early intervention would generally not be demonstrated in the short term. Although improvements in some outcome measures may be apparent within one to three years, many would only be evident after a decade or more<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Lynch, R.G. 2004. *Exceptional Returns: Economic, Fiscal and Social Benefits of Investment in Early Child Development*. Economic Policy Unit: Washington DC.

<sup>5</sup> *IBID*; also see Schweinhart, L.J. 2004. *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*, Summary, Conclusions And Frequently Asked Questions.

<sup>6</sup> OECD 2006. *Starting Strong II: Early childhood Education and Care*.

<sup>7</sup> Walker 1997, cited in Pathways to Prevention, 1999

<sup>8</sup> Jenkins, S. 2005. *Whole of Government Early Years Policy Framework*. DPAC: Hobart.

## 1.4 Who Benefits from Investment in the Early Years?

Improving the health and developmental outcomes for children is the shared responsibilities of parents, families, communities and government.

As a key principle governments need to provide universal services that support the role of parents and build community capacity to support parents and families. However, where this is not successful or where parents are challenged by their own circumstances or the difficulties of the particular child, government may need to provide extra support. This is done by targeting additional support to help these families access either universal services or more specialist services.

The following groups all benefit from appropriate investment in the early years.

### Young children 0-5 years in relation to their education and care

Good care and nutrition in pregnancy are critical to pregnancy outcomes. Stress and anxiety in pregnancy, such as that associated with domestic violence, can also influence the health and development of the baby. Appropriate support and care in pregnancy lays the groundwork for a healthy start in life.

Recent research on early brain development demonstrates that the quality of care and nurturing in the home profoundly affects a baby's development and has a lasting impact.

Opportunities for learning through play and stimulation are critical for optimal development. Parents are a child's first teacher, and most welcome support in this role. Education, and high quality care in preschool settings have been shown to have lasting effects on a child's social, emotional and intellectual development. Such settings can also provide effective support and learning opportunities for parents.

Investment in the early years can have the following benefits for children 0-5 years:

- Improved health and well-being from pre-birth onwards;
- Higher birth weight;
- Better chance of being breast fed longer and being fully immunised;
- Safer at home, with reduced risk of accidental and non-accidental injury;
- Less risk of teenage pregnancy;
- Reduced risk of substance abuse;
- Better prepared for school entry;
- Improved cognitive development;
- Improved literacy and numeracy;
- Improved behaviour and social skills;
- Better learning outcomes, especially for those at risk; and
- Staying at school longer, thereby improving life chances.

### Parents and Families

Most new parents need information and some support with parenting. Early intervention through home visiting by trained nurses, linked to other health and support services, has been shown to have lasting benefits. It has also been shown that increasing the social support for new parents reduces isolation and depression, and improves confidence and emotional health.

Tasmania's birth rate among teenagers is one of the highest in Australia. Adolescent pregnancy and parenthood is associated with greater than normal health and social risks for both parents and children, and young parents need a range of education opportunities and support.

Investment in the early years can have the following benefits for parents and families:

- More confident and competent in their parenting role;
- Better able to access the services they need;
- Feel more supported in the local community;
- Reduced stress in balancing work and family life;
- Less maternal depression; and
- Better functioning families.

### Tasmanian Communities

Outcomes for children can be improved by evidence based approaches and effective models of care and support to explore how antenatal, maternity, maternal and child health services,

child care, preschool<sup>9</sup> and primary schools can best work together with other community resources.

Effective parenting is influenced by the health of the neighbourhood and community as well as the capacity of the individual. A sense of belonging to a community, and trust in community members is associated with a lower risk of child abuse and neglect.

Investment in the early years can have the following benefits for Tasmanian communities:

- Stronger more cohesive communities with increased social capital;
- Improved levels of community safety, with less crime and less domestic violence;
- Services more responsive to local need;
- Improved range of facilities for children and families; and
- More highly skilled workforce.

#### Governments

There is evidence that early intervention and health promotion services have the most impact when governments work together as part of a coordinated network. This allows services to work more closely with communities in planning and developing more responsive and coordinated services. All agencies and services can then work together to ensure improved support for young children and their families.

Investment in the early years can have the following benefits for:

All levels of government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less chance of dysfunctional communities;</li> <li>• Less welfare dependency;</li> <li>• Better qualified and skilled workforce;</li> <li>• Services more integrated, hence more effective and efficient;</li> <li>• Better linkages between levels of government;</li> <li>• Improved interagency collaboration with reduction of duplication and waste;</li> <li>• Greater public awareness of services for children and their families;</li> <li>• Lower government expenditure across several areas (health, education, police, justice, economic development) in the medium to long term;</li> <li>• Maximum benefit for the taxpayers dollar; and</li> <li>• Potential savings in the longer term for re-investment in government priorities.</li> </ul>
Education agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Earlier identification of children at risk and earlier intervention;</li> <li>• Reduced classroom aggression and bullying;</li> <li>• Reduced demands on school support services;</li> <li>• Reduced need for remedial and second chance learning programs; and</li> <li>• Improved performance against literacy and numeracy benchmarks.</li> </ul>
Health agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Earlier identification and support for children and families with additional needs;</li> <li>• Reduced child protection substantiations and numbers of children in out-of-home care;</li> <li>• Reduced number of young offenders;</li> <li>• Improved prevention and early intervention services, with reduced spending on tertiary services (eg child protection) in the longer term; and</li> <li>• Better health and mental health.</li> </ul>
Police agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced youth and young adult crime rates; and</li> <li>• Improved community safety.</li> </ul>
Justice agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced number of offenders;</li> <li>• Reduced prison population; and</li> <li>• Reduction in domestic violence.</li> </ul>
Economic Development agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expansion of early childhood education and care programs allows more parents to participate in the workforce, employs more local people, and significantly contributes to the economy; and</li> <li>• Higher levels of employment and earnings.</li> </ul>

<sup>9</sup> In Tasmania, preschool is called kindergarten and forms part of mainstream school services.

## 2. THE TASMANIAN CONTEXT

### 2.1 Building on Tasmania's Existing Early Childhood and Child Care Initiatives

The Tasmanian Government has worked hard to build a better future for Tasmanian children.

Over the past 9 years, the Tasmanian Government has been instrumental in rebuilding Tasmania's economy. At the same time it has laid the foundations for stronger communities by investing significant additional resources into community services and infrastructure.

The Tasmanian Government has already made large investments in the early years development and services that support families – particularly vulnerable families – with young children.

Key reforms in the early years are now being implemented through initiatives such as *Launching into Learning*, the *Whole of Government Early Years Policy Framework*, and *A Way Forward* in response to the review of child protection and family support services in Tasmania.

Increasingly the Government is taking a whole-of-government approach that is informed by the needs of communities and individuals, and through close collaboration between service agencies such as the Departments of Education and of Health and Human Services, has established parenting programs to help parents understand and encourage their child's growth and development.

The Tasmanian Government recognises the importance of child care for children's development and learning and for parents trying to balance work and family. It believes that Tasmanian children and their families need child care services that are high quality, accessible, and affordable.

Despite child care being the responsibility of the Australian Government, the Tasmanian Government has stepped in to address the shortage of child care services and number of available places. New child care centres have been built in schools in areas of high demand. Locating child care centres at schools is a way we can give our children an excellent start in life by ensuring that the transition between child care and primary school is as smooth as possible.

There are approximately 36,600 children aged 5 years or younger in Tasmania.<sup>10</sup> The solid participation rates for early childhood education and child care services outlined in Table 1 are matched by evidence showing that children are faring well on a broad range of indicators.

**Table 1 – Participation Rates for Early Childhood and Child Care Services**

Early Childhood Education and Child Care Services in Tasmania	Ages	Approximate Percentage of Children who attend.
Maternal and Child Health	0-5 years	100 per cent at birth
Child care centres (includes long day care, occasional care, vacation and outside school hours care)	Weeks old – 5 years	5.5 % - 0 years 19 % - 1 year 27.2 % - 2 years 34.2 % - 3 years 27.3 % - 4 years 5.3 % - 5 years
Family Day Care In Home Care	Weeks old – 5 years	3.5 % - 0 years 12.1 % - 1 year 15.5 % - 2 years 17.9 % - 3 years 12.8 % - 4 years 6.2 % - 5 years
Kindergarten*	4-5 years	96.3%

\* Future counts will be done of children attending school-based pre-kinder programs, but sessions will vary in length, purpose and regularity.

<sup>10</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Estimated Resident Population 2005/06*.

## 2.2 Tasmania Together

This Jurisdiction Action Plan also links with Tasmania *Together*, the community's twenty-year social, environmental and economic plan, which lays the foundation for a fair and just Tasmania.

Tasmania *Together* is a plan developed by Tasmanians for Tasmanians. It outlines what Tasmanians want for themselves and their children in the year 2020. Most importantly, it measures progress towards that vision.

The benchmarks and goals in Tasmania *Together* lay the foundations for a community that is healthier, better educated, environmentally sustainable and more equitable.

Together the goals and benchmarks add up to a comprehensive framework for tackling the problems and achieving the aspirations of the Tasmanian community.

Tasmania *Together* incorporates 12 goals for Tasmania that promote, amongst other things:

- A reasonable lifestyle and standard of living for all Tasmanians;
- Confident, friendly and safe communities;
- High quality education and training for life-long learning and a skilled workforce;
- Active, healthy Tasmanians with access to quality and affordable health care services;
- Increased work opportunities for all Tasmanians; and
- Vibrant, inclusive and growing communities where people feel valued and connected.

## 2.3 Tasmania's Early Years Framework for Action

In recognition of the importance of the early years to successful learning experiences, health and general wellbeing, the Tasmanian Government has developed a whole of government policy framework for the early years. The *Early Years Framework for Action* has been developed in response to the policy framework and will continue to place top priority on the wellbeing of children in the most important years of their lives.

For the next three years, four areas of activity have been proposed based on a review of Australian and overseas evidence, and an audit of existing services and the strategic priorities for action previously established by the Tasmanian Government. These areas of activity encompass:

- Leadership, collaboration and joint training;
- Screening for intervention and support;
- Intervention programs; and
- Monitoring and reporting.

Therefore, the Tasmanian Government is now well placed to embark upon further significant and lasting reform in early childhood as a direct result of this comprehensive policy to improve outcomes for the early years.

## 2.4 Launching into Learning

In recognition that children learn so much in the first years of their lives, and that improving children's physical, social and emotional development before they go to school has great benefits for their ongoing learning, the Tasmanian Government is now implementing the first stage of the *Launching into Learning* initiative.

*Launching into Learning* is being implemented in ways that are consistent with the principles and practices in a whole of government approach to early childhood development.

The range of programs included in *Launching into Learning* work intentionally to improve learning from birth. The program will achieve positive outcomes by:

- Focussing on supporting children and families experiencing high levels of disadvantage, the priority being to children and families of highest need;
- Focussing on integration and forming partnerships with local community services;
- Enhancing collaboration between child health and education;
- Focussing on play-based learning facilitated by qualified teachers;
- Recognising that parents are their children's first and most important teachers; and
- Supporting school principals to create school cultures that value learning in the early years of a child's life and to lead the design of appropriate programs as well as the coordination and integration of relevant services in their community

*Launching into Learning* responds to the learning needs of young children in the community by having a focus on:

- Working with parents and carers;
- Partnerships with other services;
- Early literacy and school readiness;
- Intervention and prevention; and
- Marginalised, poorly resourced and 'hard to reach' families with young children.

## **2.5 A Way Forward – Child Protection Services and Family Support Services**

The Tasmanian Government has made significant changes to Child Protection Services and Family Support Services. In recent years the resources it has allocated to the area of child protection reflects a commitment to children in the early years. This includes increased funding to provide a home visiting program for teenage mothers, improving therapeutic services for children affected by trauma and abuse, and increasing the financial assistance provided to grandparents caring for grandchildren.

*A Way Forward* details the Government's response to the recently released reports on child protection. It includes twelve actions that are being taken immediately, ranging from funding additional child protection staff to deal with assessment of notifications, to undertaking structural reforms.

As part of *A Way Forward*, the Government has announced its commitment to building the capacity of family support services at the local community level. This means utilising existing infrastructure such as schools, child health services and neighbourhood houses as the foundation for more robust and accessible services for families in need. It is also funding a business case to develop a contemporary model for family support services that:

- Defines local service delivery areas;
- Describes functions, roles and activities of child and family service networks that are inclusive of the role of child protection, family support services and other related services;
- Describes information and referral services within the community of each local service delivery area; and
- Defines the collaborative and mutually supportive relationship that will exist between child protection and family support services.

## **2.6 The Tasmanian Early Years Foundation**

The Tasmanian Government has recently established the Tasmanian Early Years Foundation as a non-profit organisation that promotes and supports learning and development of Tasmanian young children aged 0-6 years through the support of individuals and groups involved and interested in the early years of childhood. It is governed by a Board that represents expert advice and community input in relation to the Early Years, with membership drawn from academic, business and community organisations.

The Foundation will draw on substantial research evidence that endorses the positive effects of high quality early childhood programs on later health, educational and social outcomes for children and families, especially among more disadvantaged groups in the community.

The Foundation will:

- Provide grants to individuals and both government and non-government organisations (e.g. schools, childcare services, neighbourhood houses, professional associations, medical research centres) to support early learning and development;
- Promote research projects designed to facilitate early learning and development and establish a research base for the early years in Tasmania;
- Raise public awareness of the importance of the early years and promote opportunities to improve the profile of initiatives in this area; and
- Facilitate training and professional learning opportunities related to the early years.

### 3. WHAT TASMANIA'S PLAN FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD AND CHILD CARE WILL ACHIEVE

#### 3.1 Measuring the Success of Further Reforms in Early Childhood Education and Child Care

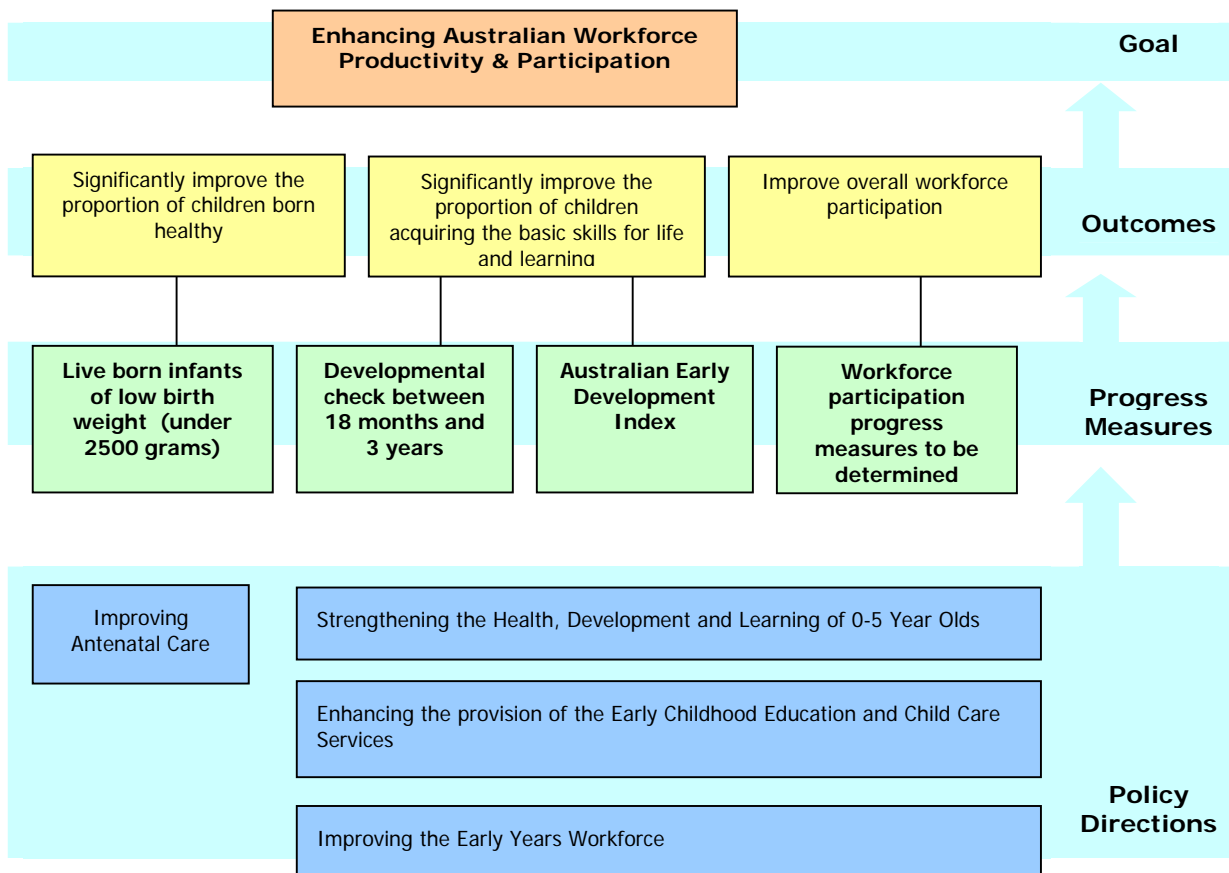
Early childhood reform provides the foundation for COAG's human capital agenda. Through the COAG process, governments have worked together to identify indicators that can measure progress toward achieving early childhood outcomes.

It has not been easy to identify progress measures, due to the complexity of factors that influence the health and well-being of individuals, and the time scale associated with achieving long term outcomes. It can take between five to ten years before changes are evident on many population measures of positive healthy development.

Nevertheless, a high level set of indicative outcomes and progress measures that relate to early childhood education and child care have been agreed by COAG. These are:

- To significantly improve the proportion of children that are born healthy (Low Birth Weight is the progress measure);
- To significantly improve the proportion of children acquiring the basic skills for life and learning (a 0-3 developmental check between 18 months and three years and a 3-5 Australian Early Development Index are the proposed progress measures); and
- To increase workforce participation and productivity (progress measures have yet to be determined).

**Figure 1 – Early Childhood Outcomes and Progress Measures Under the National Reform Agenda**



### 3.2 A Policy Framework

COAG is expected to agree to three policy directions that will have a major impact on improving outcomes in early childhood. These policy directions are consistent with Tasmania's policy commitment as reflected in the *Whole of Government Early Years Framework* documents, *Launching into Learning*, and *A Way Forward*.

The three policy directions for improving outcomes in early childhood are:

#### 1. *Improving antenatal care.*

This policy direction recognises that all Australian women should have access to high quality and affordable antenatal and maternity care, including continuity of care between postnatal and early childhood services. The focus of attention in this area is to:

- Improve antenatal services to better respond to the needs of all pregnant women;
- Provide targeted antenatal information and services to Indigenous, teenage and other vulnerable mothers.

#### 2. *Strengthening health, development and learning of 0-5 year olds.*

This policy direction recognises that there are opportunities for governments to work together to improve health, development and learning outcomes for all Australian children through both promotion and prevention strategies.

It also recognises that intervening early to reduce the impact of emerging child health or developmental difficulties will impact positively on children's capacity to acquire the basic skills for life and learning. It reflects a commitment to create a more systematic and seamless service system to support early intervention and improve early childhood outcomes. The focus of attention in this area is to:

- Deliver better integrated early years programs and services;
- Support parents' participation in their children's learning and development;
- Intervene early to reduce child health and development problems;
- Provide extra support to children and families experiencing high levels of disadvantage.

#### 3. *Enhancing the provision of early education and care services*

This policy direction recognises the importance of the States and Territories and the Commonwealth working together to achieve integrated, high quality and accessible early childhood education and care services. It also acknowledges the need to build the professionalism of the early years workforce to underpin quality improvement in early years services. The focus of attention in this area is to:

- Improve the quality of early childhood education and child care services.
- Increase the access to and affordability of early childhood education and care services

The relationship between these three policy directions, the National Reform Agenda and Tasmania's Jurisdiction Action Plan is outlined in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 – The National Reform Agenda framework for early childhood development and child care**

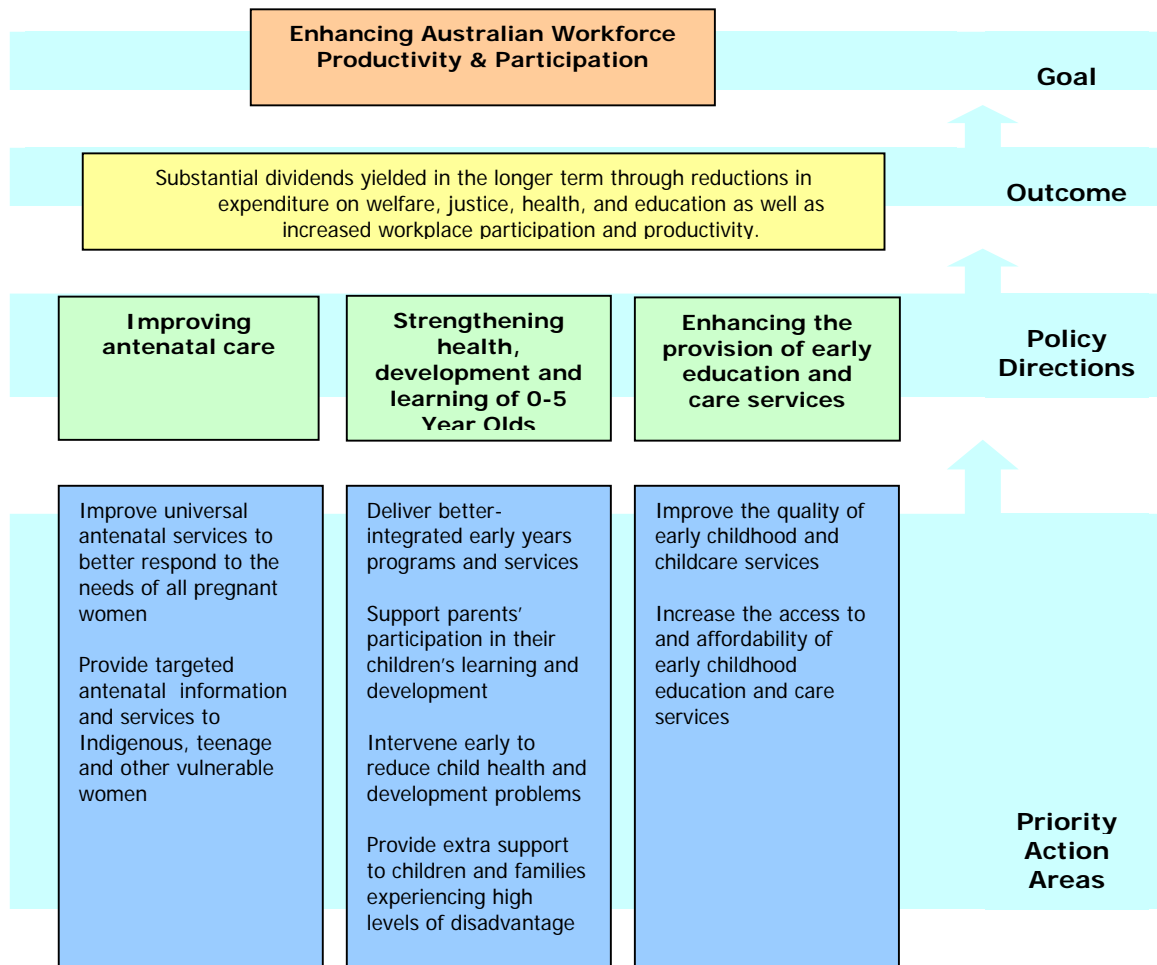


## 4. TASMANIA'S ACTION PLAN FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD AND CHILD CARE

### 4.1 What this Action Plan Includes

This Action Plan sets out Tasmania's response to the National Reform Agenda Framework for Early Childhood and Child Care. The Plan details specific policy actions to improve early childhood outcomes, in terms of actions already committed by the Tasmanian Government, recommended actions that the Tasmanian Government could undertake with Commonwealth support, and recommended actions for the Commonwealth Government.

The Plan draws on an extensive evidence base that was presented by Dr. Sue Jenkins in the *Whole of Government Early Years Policy Framework* commissioned by the Department of Premier and Cabinet. It aligns Tasmania's actions with the COAG policy directions for early childhood and child care and the priority areas for reform.



## 4.2 Overview of Committed and Proposed Actions

Since COAG announced in February 2006 its decision to invest in early childhood education and care as part of the National Reform Agenda, the Tasmanian Government has committed \$17.5 million over four years to improve antenatal care, strengthen health, development and learning of 0-5 year olds, and enhance the provision of early education and care services<sup>11</sup>.

Tasmanian Government Committed Actions	Commonwealth Government Recommended Actions	Tasmanian Government Recommended Actions that Require Commonwealth support*
<b>Policy Direction 1: Improving Antenatal Care</b>		
<b>Improve antenatal services to better respond to the needs of all pregnant women</b>		
	Expand the Raising Children Network to include antenatal and preconception information, including links to HealthInsite and other related sites	
<p><i>Proposed national/multilateral policy responses involving all the States and Territories and the Commonwealth:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement a set of national, evidence-based guidelines for antenatal care based on current work by the NHMRC;</li> <li>• Provide training and other support to professionals working in all antenatal settings to assist pregnant women to address risk and protective behaviours starting with smoking, use of alcohol and other drugs, breastfeeding and nutrition;</li> <li>• Require pre-conception and antenatal specific messages to be incorporated in the development of all future government public health campaigns, where relevant.</li> </ul>		
<b>Provide targeted antenatal information and services to Indigenous, teenage and other vulnerable mothers.</b>		
Fund a position at the Royal Hobart Hospital to support and advise staff about child protection issues and follow up on their concerns about vulnerable children <sup>†</sup> .	Extend the Enhanced Primary Care Initiative to provide additional support from general practice and case management for pregnant women who have multiple social risk factors.	
Provide Home Nurse support for Teenage Mothers	Introduce a Baby Bonus part pre-payment to women under the age of twenty-one to encourage early and universal participation in maternity or antenatal services. Eligibility for pre-payment would start in the seventh month of pregnancy on professional certification that an appropriate package of antenatal care has been received.	
Provide capital and recurrent funding for the Claremont Young Mothers Program to support teenage mothers who are expecting a new baby.		
Amend the Children & Families Act to allow workers to become involved with at-risk families before a child is born.		

<sup>11</sup> A number of actions focus on early interventions that cover age groups other than 0-5 year olds. However, the majority of high risk children are in the youngest age groups.

Tasmanian Government Committed Actions	Commonwealth Government Recommended Actions	Tasmanian Government Recommended Actions that Require Commonwealth support*
<p><i>Proposed national/multilateral policy responses involving all the States and Territories and the Commonwealth:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and deliver targeted information strategies for groups of disadvantaged women to promote healthy pregnancies, building on the Australian Better Health Initiative;</li> <li>• Encourage exchange and better linkages of health workers between Commonwealth-funded Aboriginal Medical Services and States and Territory services to create greater linkages between Commonwealth and State funded services.</li> </ul>		
<p><b><i>Policy Direction 2: Strengthening the Health, Development and Learning of 0 – 5 year olds</i></b>  <b>Delivering better integrated early years programs and services</b></p>		
Fund the <i>Early Support Pilot Program</i> in which non-government services work with selected children and families referred to the child protection system <sup>+</sup> .	Enhance the integration of local services (including child care) for families and their children, including through joint planning, capital investment for co-located services or other forms of enhanced collaboration	Fund the Family Partnership Training Program to enable cross-agency professional development for service staff to effectively respond to the needs of families and children.
Provide capital funding to the Gagebrook Community Centre <sup>+</sup> .		Build on the success of the Raising Children Network by using its resources to provide high quality and consistent information about children's development through a variety of channels.
Trial the co-location of children and family services at different sites appropriate to the locality, such as schools, child care centres, community houses and community health centres.		
Resource primary schools to focus on integration and form partnerships with local community services.		
Trial the development of 'hub' schools as a governance model for the <i>Launching into Learning</i> initiatives that support the 0-5 year age group.		
<p><i>Proposed national/multilateral policy responses involving all the States and Territories and the Commonwealth:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop effective collaborative mechanisms between Commonwealth and State and Territory governments at a State/Territory level, building on existing arrangements where appropriate;</li> <li>• Enhance the integration of local services (excluding child care) for families and their children, including through joint planning for co-located services or other forms of collaboration.</li> </ul>		

Tasmanian Government Committed Actions	Commonwealth Government Recommended Actions	Tasmanian Government Recommended Actions that Require Commonwealth support*
<b>Supporting parents' participation in their children's learning and development</b>		
Establish early literacy programs that support parents' participation in their children's learning and development, such as the Reading Together program.	Expand funding to the NGO sector to provide more supported playgroups for parents needing additional support.	
<b>Intervening early to reduce child health and development problems</b>		
Develop a Family Assessment Tool to identify vulnerable and at-risk children and families <sup>+</sup> .		C-Frame training for health professionals in the Department of Health and Human Services, linked to use of the Family Assessment Tool.
Fund four community based child protection positions to help school communities, child care services, neighbourhood houses and other services to better identify and assist at-risk families <sup>+</sup> .		Trial the Universal Parenting Program (Triple P) in one community for 1000 families with children 0-5 years old, to increase parents' competence in their parenting role and reduce the prevalence of children's behavioural and emotional problems.
Trial new models of collaboration with child health services to target families with children 0-4 years, and form partnerships with other relevant services and agencies.		
Improve therapeutic services for children affected by trauma and abuse <sup>+</sup> .		
Establish a fortnightly medical clinic at the Royal Hobart Hospital to provide medical screening and referral services for children entering state care, with children aged 0-5 years having immediate priority for this service <sup>+</sup> .		
<b>Providing extra support to children and families experiencing high levels of disadvantage</b>		
Resource schools to provide support to 0-5 year old children and families experiencing high levels of disadvantage, as part of <i>Launching into Learning</i> ,	Broaden eligibility criteria for special Child Care Benefit to include families experiencing very serious economic disadvantage, and who are not otherwise covered by the scheme.	Pilot a Sustained Home Visiting Program (5% of births per annum in Tasmania).
Provide financial assistance to grandparents caring for grandchildren aged 0-5 years <sup>+</sup> .	Ensure sufficient support is provided to meet the cost to ECEC services of providing care to very disadvantaged children, including through the Commonwealth's Inclusion Support Subsidy.	Fund the Intensive Parenting Program (NEWPIN) for at-risk and vulnerable mothers, on a statewide basis.

Tasmanian Government Committed Actions	Commonwealth Government Recommended Actions	Tasmanian Government Recommended Actions that Require Commonwealth support *
	Improve access to high quality child care programs for children from families deemed to be at-risk, where this is part of a case work plan, including making child care places available to 3 year olds who are under State Guardianship.	Jointly purchase new child care and preschool (kindergarten) places for very disadvantaged children, with distribution determined jointly at a State/Territory level.
	Priority access to Commonwealth support services for children 0-5 years in out-of-home care and under state guardianship.	Establish dedicated liaison and coordination points between the Commonwealth and Tasmanian Governments in order to identify child care centres willing to take very disadvantaged children and to facilitate appropriate access to Commonwealth/State funding programs.
<b><i>Policy Direction 3: Enhancing the provision of early education and care services</i></b>		
<b>Improving the quality of early childhood education and care services</b>		
Fund a consultancy to review and re-engineer business processes associated with Child Protection Services, Family Support Services, State-wide Intake Services, Child Protection After Hours Service, and Out-of-Home Care arrangements <sup>+12</sup> .	Fund development and implementation of a national Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) survey, through which to improve the information/evidence base on which to plan provision of early years services to children.	
Legislate to create a Child Death Review Committee <sup>+</sup> .		
Implement a new organisational structure of regional teams in Child and Family Services by aligning service areas with those of education and police services, and funding high-level positions to entrench cross agency working <sup>+</sup> .		
Establish a workforce development team in Children and Family Services to induct new staff, plan professional learning for all staff and improve the qualifications of individual staff through enrolment in the new early years degree at the University of Tasmania <sup>+</sup> .		

<sup>12</sup> This will include consideration of the integrated and cost-effective delivery of services to the 0-5 year age group.

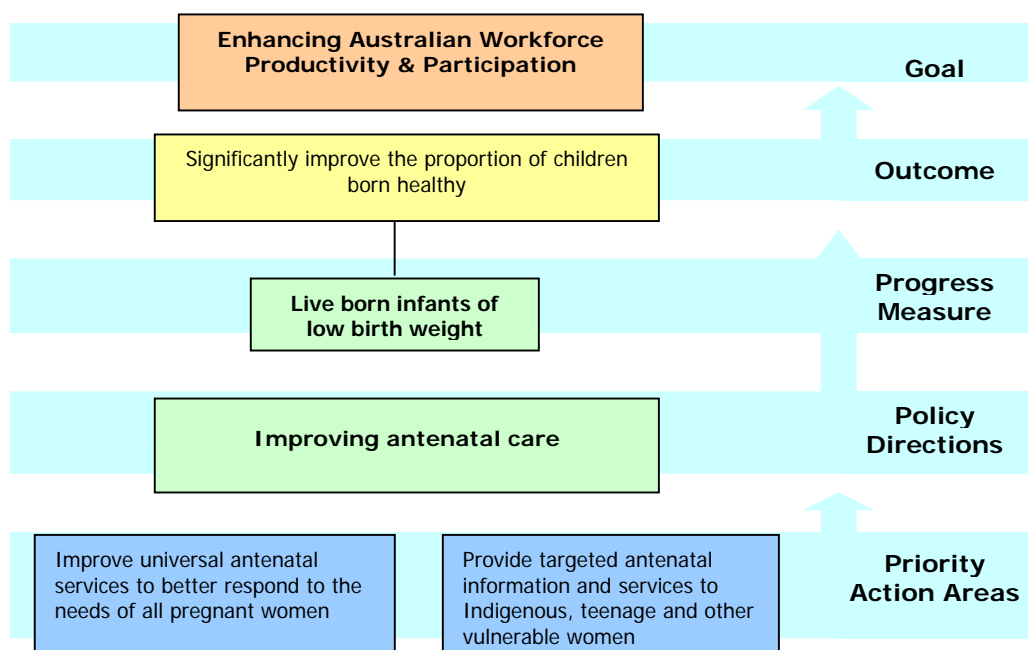
Tasmanian Government Committed Actions	Commonwealth Government Recommended Actions	Tasmanian Government Recommended Actions that Require Commonwealth support *
<p>Increase employment opportunities in the early years workforce and provide professional learning for all staff working with 0-5 year olds, as part of developing and expanding the birth-to-four early learning family support programs being implemented in primary schools. This will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding the equivalent of 12 extra full-time early years teachers;</li> <li>• Funding the equivalent of 3 extra full-time staff in a combination of teacher aides, social workers and child health nurses;</li> <li>• Revising early learning curriculum for early childhood education and child care; and</li> <li>• Providing professional learning.</li> </ul>		
<p>Improve the provision of quality ECEC services by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting access to <i>Skills to Care: Supporting Quality Child Care</i>, to further build the capacity of the early childhood education and child care workforce by upgrading the skills of early childhood workers through scholarships, bridging courses, mentoring, post-development and training;</li> <li>• Supporting VET-in-schools child care teachers to gain industry experience and exposure to current practices within the sector;</li> <li>• Supporting the establishment of a Child Care Parents &amp; Friends Association to help parents set standards and monitor the provision of quality early childhood care and education in Tasmania.</li> </ul>		

Tasmanian Government Committed Actions	Commonwealth Government Recommended Actions	Tasmanian Government Recommended Actions that Require Commonwealth support*
Support training in selected qualifications or units of competence for workers in non-government community based early childhood education and child care services (e.g. playgroups/play centres/child care centres), and review provision of publicly funded training in this area.		
<p><i>Proposed national/multilateral policy responses involving all the States and Territories and the Commonwealth:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop an intergovernmental agreement on a national approach to quality assurance and regulations for early childhood education and care.</li> </ul>		
<b>Increasing the access to and affordability of early childhood education and care services</b>		
	Fund capital upgrade and maintenance program for Child Care Centres.	Increase the contact time four year olds spend in a kindergarten program, starting with the most disadvantaged children.
	Provide capital incentive funding for Child Care Centres to enable child care places to be available for children 0-5 years who are deemed to be at-risk.	
	Fund Child care Centres to provide parents with computer access to websites promoting information related to ECEC.	

+ This action covers age groups other than 0-5 year olds, with 0-5 year olds comprising approximately 40% of all children.

\* Provision of the full package of reforms set out in this plan is only possible with financial support from the Commonwealth, together with its cooperation and commitment to form a partnership and to a fair sharing of the costs and benefits of that reform.

## Policy Direction 1: Improving Antenatal Care



The first of the two agreed COAG outcomes for early childhood development is to significantly improve the proportion of children born healthy. Achievement of this outcome will be measured by improvement in the rate of babies born of low birth weight.

Low birth weight is defined as babies weighing less than 2,500 grams at birth. Low birth weight is linked to poorer health outcomes throughout childhood and poor health in adulthood,<sup>13</sup> and therefore has implications for educational attainment and productivity later in life.

Low birth weight may result from pre-term birth (less than 37 weeks gestation), foetal growth retardation or both.<sup>14</sup> Factors influencing the babies birth weight include socio-economic disadvantage, the size and age of the mother, the number of babies previously born, the mother's nutritional status, smoking and other risk behaviours such as alcohol and substance abuse, illness during pregnancy, and the duration of pregnancy. Low socio economic status is probably the greatest risk factor in low birth weight due to the higher prevalence of risk factors such as smoking and poor nutrition in populations of women experiencing social and economic disadvantage.

There is a compelling body of evidence that investment in antenatal care and early childhood reduces the incidence of complex social problems before these become entrenched.

Antenatal and early childhood interventions are more likely to be cost-effective and to carry wider influence on outcomes, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Increasing protective factors such as health and lifestyle of mothers prior to and following birth can lead to improved longer-term outcomes.

Currently almost all pregnant Australian women receive high quality and appropriate antenatal care. However, poor planning and delivery can compromise the provision of universal antenatal services. Complex funding models involving both Commonwealth and State governments impede improvements.

In Tasmania, public hospital antenatal clinics provide low risk antenatal care from a range of medical staff, including midwives and obstetricians. However, most women have their pregnancy confirmed by a GP, with the majority having their antenatal care provided by a specialist obstetrician.

<sup>13</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005, *A Picture of Australia's Children*. AIHW Cat. No. PHE 58. Canberra AIHW, p.37.

<sup>14</sup> Case, A and Parsons, C (2006) Children's Health and Social Mobility, in *The Future of Children*, Princeton-Brookings, vol 16, no 2, p 154.

High-risk/complex care antenatal clinics are also provided in public hospitals in northern and southern Tasmania, with a focus on collaboration between health professionals and other relevant services, to provide high quality antenatal care and support that is tailored to individual needs.

Antenatal, preconception and parenting information can positively impact on lifestyle choices and the capacity of people to access the support they need.

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**Action 1:** Fund a position at the Royal Hobart Hospital to support and advise staff about child protection issues and follow up on their concerns about vulnerable children<sup>+</sup>

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In response to the recently released reports on the child protection system in Tasmania, the Tasmanian Government has recognised the needs of children in the early years by providing a new position at the Royal Hobart Hospital to support and advise staff concerning child protection issues and vulnerable children. If the model proves successful, it will be expanded to other regions.

This position also complements the recent appointment of a Complex Care Coordinator to the Complex Care Antenatal Clinic at the Royal Hobart Hospital to improve continuity of care, early intervention and a multidisciplinary approach that supports pregnant women with complex care needs.

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**Action 2:** Provide Home Nurse Support for Teenage Mothers

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Tasmania has the second highest teen pregnancy rate in Australia, and this brings significant challenges for mothers, babies and the broader community.

Adolescent pregnancy is often associated with an increased likelihood of inadequate prenatal care and poor birth outcomes. Maternal factors such as young maternal age, race, marital status and tobacco usage during pregnancy may affect use of antenatal care and birth outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

The evidence shows that adolescent mothers at greatest risk of child abuse, neglect and subsequent repeated adolescent pregnancy are those younger than 18 years. In addition to this adolescent mothers who have subsequent births within two years face an even greater risk of poor birth outcomes than first-time teenage mothers. These mothers are also more likely to have lower levels of educational attainment. The subsequent pregnancy rather than the first, generally commits the mother to dependency on welfare and generates the more substantial cost to the community.

As part of a package of measures to enhance the health and wellbeing of Tasmanian children and their families, the Tasmanian Government has made a commitment to provide a home visiting program for adolescent parents.

First time, young parents (aged between 15-19 years) will benefit the most from this type of intervention. Young parents are vulnerable by virtue of their particular life stage.

There is clear evidence that home visiting initiated by nurses as part of a multidisciplinary team promotes infant mental health and development, improves parenting capacity, reduces child abuse, reduces children's behavioural problems, and reduces children's involvement in the juvenile justice system.

The program commences from confirmation of pregnancy to 24 months.

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<sup>15</sup> Sangalang, B.B, Barth, R.P, & Painter, J.S. 2006. First-birth outcomes and timing of second-births. A statewide case management program for adolescent mothers. *Health and Social Work*. 31:1:54-63.

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**Action 3:** Provide capital and recurrent funding for the Claremont Young Mothers Program to support teenage mothers who are expecting a new baby

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The Tasmanian Government is committed to making sure teenage parents and their children are given the best possible chance in life. The Claremont College currently operates a very successful program that supports teenage parents to stay in education as well as learn valuable parenting and life skills. Funds have been allocated to refurbish the facility to provide suitable sleep areas and an enhanced playground for children and additional rooms for individual or group work and meetings.

The Tasmanian Government has committed to enhance the program with further funding over the next four years for staffing and resources to provide additional support programs, teaching and assist with access to childcare.

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**Action 4:** Amend the Children & Families Act to allow workers to become involved with at-risk families before a child is born

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The *Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act* provides a sound philosophical and practice foundation for implementing child protection services in Tasmania. Currently however, the Act does not allow for child protection services to be involved with a family before a child is born, even if prior family history or presenting characteristics of the parents during the antenatal period suggest the newborn child will be at risk.

In these circumstances where the family is known to child protection services, an unofficial 'alert' is sent to the hospital where the mother is likely to present and staff are requested not to discuss this alert with the family. This places staff involved in antenatal care in a compromised position in working with the mother and building a trusting relationship.

It also means that assessment of the child's risk cannot be initiated until the child is born, often resulting in hurried assessment processes conducted before the child and mother leave the hospital. In the worst-case scenario, a newborn child can be removed from the family soon after birth without direct interaction and discussion with the parents. This is traumatic for the child, the family and staff involved.

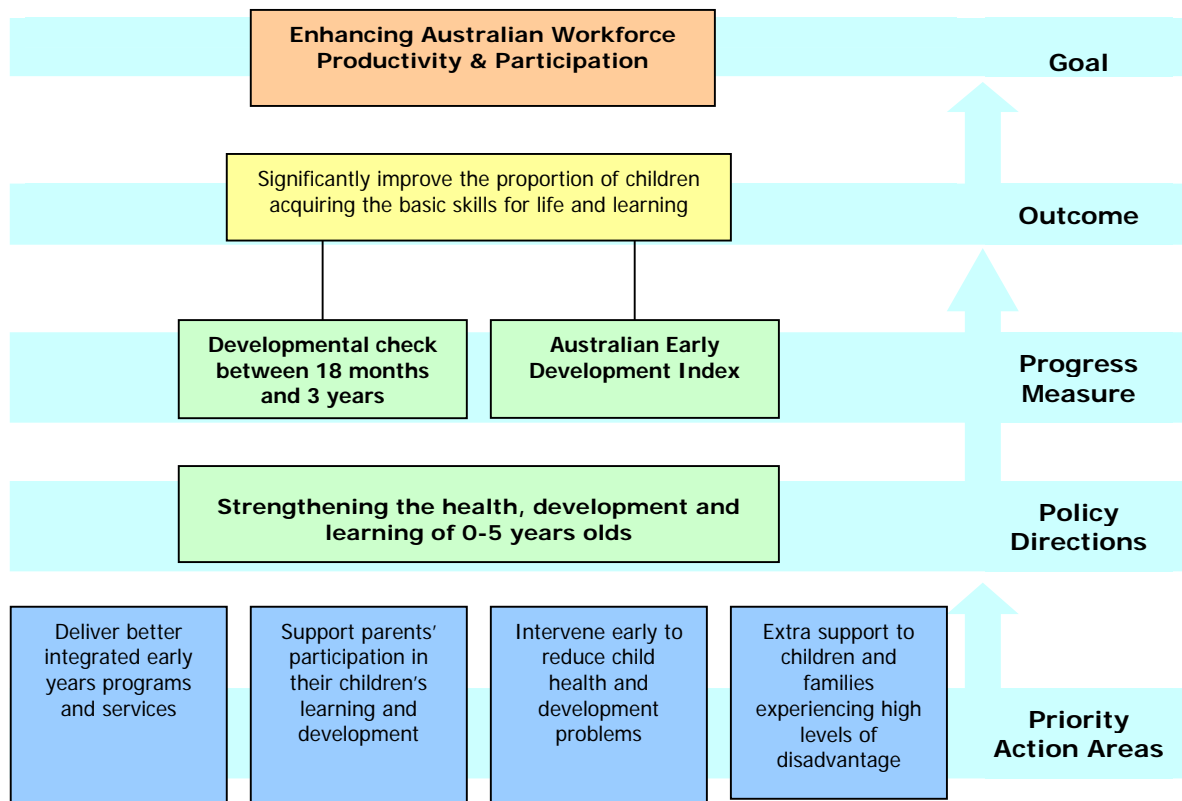
Policy work will be fast-tracked so that staff have access to the practice manuals, documentation and guidelines needed to implement the new system.

#### **Proposed Multilateral Actions**

*The following actions are proposed national/multilateral policy responses involving all the States and Territories and the Commonwealth, and would be funded out of existing resources.*

- a. Implement a set of national, evidence-based guidelines for antenatal care based on current work by the NHMRC;
- b. Provide training and other support to professionals working in all antenatal settings to assist pregnant women to address risk and protective behaviours starting with smoking, use of alcohol and other drugs, breastfeeding and nutrition;
- c. Require pre-conception and antenatal specific messages to be incorporated in the development of all future government public health campaigns, where relevant.

**Policy Direction 2: Strengthening Health, Development and Learning of 0-5 year olds**



The second of the two COAG agreed outcomes for early childhood development is to significantly improve the proportion of children acquiring the basic skills for life and learning.

Because positive early life experiences have long-term cumulative health and social advantages, a prevention and early intervention approach aimed at quickly identifying and addressing problems has the greatest chance of avoiding life trajectories that involve high risk or harmful behaviour.

The Tasmanian Government's *Early Years Framework* includes the following two principles:

- Positive child health, development and wellbeing should be promoted through a universal system of support that every child in Tasmania can access; and
- Targeted and additional resources should be firmly embedded within a universal service system, and should be directed to those families or communities where risk factors for poor outcomes are high.

Although the Tasmanian Government recognises the need to provide universal services that support the role of parents, it also acknowledges that where this is not successful or where the parents are challenged by their own circumstances or the difficulties of a particular child, the Government may need to provide extra support. It can do this by targeting additional support to these families to help them access either universal services or more specialist services.

The Tasmanian Government also recognises that communities expect child, youth and family services to be delivered in a seamless manner, without the need to understand the distinctions between different governments, agencies and programs. Governments therefore need to work together to ensure that service provision is understandable, accessible and provides timely and appropriate service pathways.

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## ***Deliver better integrated early years programs and services***

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**Action 5:** Fund the *Early Support Pilot Program* in which non-government services work with selected children and families referred to the child protection system<sup>+</sup>

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The Tasmanian Government is committed to working in collaboration with the non-government sector to improve the quality, effectiveness and sustainability of family support services, including the development of the framework, operational procedures and guidelines for a coordinated state-wide family support service system.

Based on the Review of the Tasmanian Family Support Service and the Report on Child protection Services in Tasmania, a contemporary model for family support services will be developed that:

- Defines local service delivery areas;
- Describes functions, roles and activities of child and family services networks which are inclusive of the role of child protection, family support services and other related services;
- Describes information and referral services within the community of each local service delivery area, including future potential to accept referral for assessment as an alternative pathway to child protection services; and
- Defines the collaborative and mutually supportive relationship that will exist between child protection and family support services.

The *Early Support Program* trialled in Southern Tasmania has funded non-government organisations to work with selected children and families referred to the child protection system. Although in its early stages, the response from both non-government agencies and child protection services suggest that there are encouraging results for many families.

The program will now be extended to allow a smooth transition to the strengthened family support and early intervention services resulting from reforms that are currently being undertaken in the Department of Health and Human Services.

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**Action 6:** Provide capital funding to the Gagebrook Community Centre<sup>+</sup>

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As part of its commitment to the Neighbourhood House Program, the Tasmanian Government has committed funding to redevelop the Gagebrook Community Centre. Through the Neighbourhood House program, the government aims to build community capacity in socially isolated and disadvantaged areas or neighbourhoods through providing family support, training and employment opportunities.

The Redeveloped Gagebrook Community Centre will provide a Family Support Service and offer child care facilities for residents undertaking the range of training and development programs. The Centre will be a multipurpose facility with co-location capacity to support collaborative service activity and outreach activity.

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**Action 7:** Trial the co-location of children and family services at different sites appropriate to the locality, such as schools, child care centres, community houses and community health centres

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As part of *A Way Forward*, which was the Tasmanian Government's immediate response to recent reviews of the child protection system in Tasmania, the Government is committed to building the capacity of family support services at the local community level. This means utilising existing infrastructure such as schools, child care centres, child health services and neighbourhood houses as the foundation for more robust and accessible services for families in need.

Universal services, such as the community health centre or school, are critical entry points for people to get the support and help they need from more targeted and specialist services. This reflects a key underlying principle in the Whole of Government Policy Framework for the Early Years, which is that targeted services and additional resources should be firmly embedded within a universal service system, and should be directed to those families or communities where risk factors are high.

The integration of services across agencies and organisations, through strong local coordination and co-location of services wherever appropriate to meet local need, strengthens social cohesion and benefits young children and their families.

The co-location model builds on a strong evidence base that services working together can remove existing barriers to access so that children and families can quickly receive the services they need.

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**Action 8:** Resource primary schools to focus on integration and form partnerships with local community services

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**Action 9:** Trial the development of 'hub' schools as a governance model for the Launching into Learning initiatives that support the 0-5 year age group

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The Tasmanian Government is committed to supporting primary schools so that they can participate in local planning and partnerships that enable effective delivery of integrated early years services. This commitment recognises that partnerships between schools, parents, and the local community can help create supportive networks that can meet the needs of both parents and families.

The Tasmanian Government estimates that currently 41% of primary schools are focusing on integration and forming partnerships with local early years community services. This is a priority into which schools will be directing at least 10% of available *Launching into Learning* resources over the coming four years.

12 primary schools have initially been identified as 'hub' schools, with principals taking a leadership role in supporting schools and developing strong community networks across their Learning Service areas.

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**Action 10, with Commonwealth support:** Fund the Family Partnership Training Program to enable cross-agency professional development for service staff to effectively respond to the needs of families and children

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The Family Partnership Training Program enables people working with children and parents to develop supportive and effective relationships through improving understanding of the helping process and developing the skills to engage parents.

Training is crucial to implementing the programs in the early years, as it enables the development of shared language and understandings across agencies, and supports the genuine cultural shift that is necessary for people to come together to prioritise the child. Family Partnership Training is an evidence-based training model that is built on the need for services to better support families to develop their own solutions and reduce their dependency on 'experts'.

With the support of the Commonwealth Government, this program will be able to offer cross-sectoral, cross discipline training for those service providers in education, child health, care and protection, police and community sector organisations who need to work more effectively with families and children.

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**Action 11, with Commonwealth support:** Build on the success of the Raising Children Network by using its resources to provide high quality and consistent information about children's development through a variety of channels

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There are a number of information websites for new parents and 'parents to be' that provide information on a wide range of matters related to parenting and child development. This information is most effective when it is consistently presented, and universally promoted and accessible.

The Raising Children Network is an Australian Parenting Website supported by the Commonwealth Government that is already successfully providing quality information to parents.

The Tasmanian Government will work collaboratively with other governments to build on this success by using its resources to provide high quality and consistent information about children's development. The child development and parenting information package that is developed should be evidence-based using the most reliable sources, regularly updated, accessible and promoted to all women at the first antenatal visit and at birth, and allow for the inclusion of culturally specific and Tasmania-specific information.

### **Proposed Multilateral Actions**

*The following actions are proposed national/multilateral policy responses involving all the States and Territories and the Commonwealth, and would be funded out of existing resources.*

- d. Develop effective collaborative mechanisms between Commonwealth and State and Territory governments at a State/Territory level, building on existing arrangements where appropriate.
- e. Enhance the integration of local services (excluding child care) for families and their children, including through joint planning for co-located services or other forms of collaboration.

### ***Support parents' participation in their children's learning and development***

**Action 12:** Establish early literacy programs that support parents' participation in their children's learning and development, such as the Reading Together program

Early development of language and literacy skills is crucial to young children's potential to achieve at school and later in life. It is extremely important that children are read to on a daily basis to foster a love of books and learning. The parent/child partnership is significant in this process.

There are very strong links between literacy, school performance, self-esteem and life chances. Poor literacy skills are associated with generally lower education, earnings, health and social outcomes as well as being linked to high rates of unemployment, welfare dependence and teenage parenting.

Children who struggle with reading in the first years of schooling are more likely to dislike reading, read less, and then fall further behind. Efforts to help children who have negative attitudes to reading are not always successful. Focusing on activities early in life that encourage positive attitudes to books and reading, lay the foundation for sound literacy at school.

The Tasmanian Government is committed to providing new family literacy programs that help parents in their role as their child's first teacher. Play based learning facilitated by qualified teachers underpins the family support programs, which are designed to provide parents with the necessary skills to give their children a strong foundation for effective learning.

Reading Together is a free weekly parent and child program run by the State Library of Tasmania. Held at selected libraries, schools and other community locations, the program involves parents and carers bringing their pre-school aged children once a week to hear stories, sing songs and borrow books. Each session is based around an exciting story telling program conducted by a qualified teacher. The program is an opportunity for parents and carers to introduce their children to books and reading in friendly surroundings.

The Tasmanian Government knows how important it is to provide literacy support to children and parents, especially those in rural communities. Currently this program is run out of libraries, schools and other community centres at Queenstown, Smithton, Huonville, Dodges Ferry, and Clarence Plains. The Program will be extended to St Helens, George Town, New Norfolk, Mayfield and Devonport.

## ***Intervene early to reduce child health and development problems***

**Action 13:** Develop a Family Assessment Tool to identify vulnerable and at-risk children and families<sup>+</sup>

Over the years the role of child health services has focussed on health promotion and disease prevention. The early years health service relies heavily on Family and Child Health nurses working from local child health sites across Tasmania. These nurses monitor the growth and development of young children, especially during the first twelve months of life, and provide parenting education and counselling.

Given the relevance of the family environment to the healthy growth and development of babies and young children, it is vital for family needs to be identified and addressed as early as possible. Family assessment is important as a universal screening tool for intervention and support because it provides an opportunity for earlier identification of families at risk and enables staff to work more effectively with families and support them in their parenting role.

The assessment will be offered to all families by the Family and Child Health Nurse through a universal first contact (either antenatally or postnatally) and assessment review as required. Where concerns are identified, families will have an opportunity to openly discuss their issues with appropriately skilled health professionals. Families will be able to prioritise their issues from which an intervention plan would be developed and support provided to accomplish family goals. This process will further identify the existence of gaps in the service system and the resources required to support these families. It will also guide referrals to other specialists and agencies e.g housing department, social worker and parenting centres.

**Action 14, with Commonwealth support:** C-Frame training for health professionals in the Department of Health and Human Services, linked to use of the Family Assessment tool

C-Frame Family Assessment Training will provide further/refresher training to health professionals in the Family Child and Youth Health section in the Department of Health and Human Services. This training will help implement the new family assessment universal screening tool.

Although initial training in the use of the Family Assessment tool was provided it is now evident that health professionals require further support in the form of tools to develop their capacity to work with clients: engaging, gaining commitment, undertaking a contextual analysis and planning care options.

C-frame is the innovative practice framework developed by the Parenting Research Centre in Victoria. It offers relevant training that is complementary to the approach to working with families being developed through Family Partnerships Training.

**Action 15:** Fund four community based child protection positions to help school communities, child care services, neighbourhood houses and other services to better identify and assist at-risk families<sup>+</sup>

The safety and wellbeing of young children needs to be a shared responsibility that involves families and communities. As part of promoting a shared responsibility for supporting vulnerable children and families, the Tasmanian Government has created four new positions that will enable child protection workers in each region of Tasmania to be available for consultation with government and non-government services. These staff will:

- Engage school communities, teachers, police officers and health professionals to enable them to better identify and assist at-risk families;
- Participate in case conferences;
- Participate in family meetings and visits; and
- Provide training sessions for staff at the local level.

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**Action 16:** Trial new models of collaboration with child health services to target families with children 0-4 years, and form partnerships with other relevant services and agencies

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Improving children's physical, social and emotional development before they go to school has great benefits for their ongoing learning. Positive child health, development and wellbeing can be best promoted through education and health services working together to support parents promote and nurture their young children so they can develop to their full potential.

Collaboration is an important vehicle for bringing together a diversity of skills and resources for effective delivery of services and programs and for ensuring a whole of government approach to achieving early child hood outcomes. Strategies that focus on services and programs of only one kind of profession or organisation have had limited success in solving many problems that vulnerable families face.

Through the *Launching into Learning* initiative, the Tasmanian Government will invest around \$1.2 million dollars over the next four years in developing collaboration models and implementing programs in partnership with local services and community groups to help support the wellbeing and learning needs of young children in each community.

Some early work has been done to enhance collaboration between child health and education. At least 10% of the schools involved in the first phase of this initiative will be trialling new models of collaboration with child health services. Partnerships are also being formed with other relevant services and agencies, such as Good Beginnings, Mission Australia, Salvation Army, and local councils.

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**Action 17:** Improve therapeutic services for children affected by trauma and abuse<sup>+</sup>

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Protecting the physical and mental health of young children is a priority for the Tasmanian Government. Children should be able to grow up in supportive and caring surroundings. Where children have been exposed to family violence, it is important that they have access to specialist support.

The Tasmanian Government has established a support and counselling service for adults and a therapeutic service for children who are exposed to domestic violence. This commitment has involved extending the telephone service and information line, providing assistance to parents to work with their children to address the impact of family violence on their lives, and employing more specialist staff to work with children who have witnessed family violence.

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**Action 18:** Establish a fortnightly medical clinic at the Royal Hobart Hospital to provide medical screening and referral services for children entering state care, with children aged 0-5 years having immediate priority for this service<sup>+</sup>

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Children in care represent a high risk group, with approximately 40% of these children being under 5 years of age, and 10% under one year of age. This group of children has high health needs that are often unrecognised and unmet<sup>16</sup>.

The recent Review of Child Protection Services in Tasmania recommended that mandatory health screening be provided to all children entering state care through paediatric clinics provided at public hospitals, utilising protocols and processes to be developed with paediatric medical services.

As a first stage in implementation of this recommendation, a fortnightly medical clinic is being established at the Royal Hobart Hospital. The clinic will provide medical screening and referral services for children entering state care, with children in the early years having immediate priority for this service.

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<sup>16</sup> Tzioumi, D. & Nathanson, D. 2006. *Health Needs of Children in Out of Home Care – Results from a Health Screening Clinic*.

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**Action 19, with Commonwealth support:** Trial the Universal Parenting Program (Triple P) in one community for 1000 families with children 0-5 years old, to increase parents' competence in their parenting role and reduce the prevalence of children's behavioural and emotional problems

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A lack of warm positive relationship with parents; insecure attachment; harsh, inflexible or inconsistent discipline practices; inadequate supervision of and involvement with children; marital conflict and breakdown and parental mental health problems increase the risk that children will develop major behavioural and emotional problems.

The Triple P – Positive Parenting Program provides a universal approach to providing parenting information, with the opportunity to deliver more intensive support to vulnerable families. It employs a range of communication and training strategies to ensure that the most vulnerable can be reached.

Triple P targets five core parenting principles: creating a safe engaging environment, creating a positive learning environment, assertive discipline, reasonable expectations, and looking after oneself as a parent.

Triple P is widely recognised as an effective parenting support program.

***Provide extra support to children and families experiencing high levels of disadvantage***

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**Action 20:** Resource schools to provide support to 0-5 year old children and families experiencing high levels of disadvantage, as part of *Launching into Learning*,

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A key planning principle for *Launching into Learning* is to focus on supporting vulnerable children and families. Currently, 78% of state government schools with an Educational Needs Index (ENI) score<sup>17</sup> in excess of 70 are involved in this initiative. The remaining 22% will be included by mid 2007.

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**Action 21:** Provide financial assistance to grandparents caring for grandchildren aged 0-5 years<sup>+</sup>

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A growing number of grandparents are taking on primary responsibility for the care of their grandchildren. Grandchildren may come into the care of their grandparents in one of three ways:

- Through informal arrangements (these arrangements may come about with or without the agreement of the child's parents, and may or may not involve the State child protection authorities;
- Through family law parenting orders (where grandparents or other people concerned with the care, welfare or development of a child have applied to the Family Court for a parenting order); or
- Through care and protection orders made by a Magistrates Court.

Grandparents who take on the care of a second family face a number of financial issues. They may have to retire early to cope with the demands of child rearing, or may need to continue working longer than expected to meet the costs of having children living with them full-time.

In recognition of the financial hardship faced by grandparents caring for young children, the Tasmanian Government will provide them with financial assistance.

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<sup>17</sup>The Educational Needs Index (ENI) is used to help allocate resources to schools. It differentially resources schools on the basis of their relative socio economic status. A school's ENI has two components: the proportion of a school's student population that is in receipt of student assistance; and a measure of the socio economic status of the areas from which the school's enrolments are drawn (based on the ABS Socio Economic Indexes for Areas data). The ENI can range from a score of 0 to 120, with a higher score reflecting a higher level of socio economic disadvantage.

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**Action 22, with Commonwealth support:** Pilot a Sustained Home Visiting Program (5% of births per annum in Tasmania)

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There is clear evidence that sustained home visiting initiated by nurses as a part of a multidisciplinary team promotes infant health and development, improves parenting capacity and reduces child abuse, children's behavioural problems and children's involvement in the juvenile justice system<sup>18</sup>.

Sustained Home Nurse Visiting is an effective strategy for outcomes-based parental support and intervention. Sustained home visiting builds a better response to parents and carers who have higher levels of need and has the overall aim of enhancing the health, education and wellbeing and resilience of children. It is most effective when delivered as part of a broad set of services for families and young children.

With Commonwealth Government support, a Sustained Home Visiting Pilot Program will be able to target the most vulnerable mothers in the State.

The program will support 5 per cent of the anticipated 6,500 new babies born annually in Tasmania where the following risk factors are present: socially isolated parents, parents where there are precursors of insecure attachment, post-natal depression, family violence, neglect and abuse, negative early parenting experience of the parent, and substance abuse.

Participants will be identified through the Family Assessment Process, which is offered to all families by the child health nurse through a universal first contact (either antenatally or postnatally).

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**Action 23 with Commonwealth support:** Fund the Intensive Parenting Program (NEWPIN) for at-risk and vulnerable mothers, on a statewide basis

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NEWPIN works with the primary carers of children under 5 years to provide support for some of the most vulnerable families in the community. These carers/parents may be experiencing one or more of the following: depression and other forms of mental illness, isolation, insecurity, lack of trust, loss of identity, lack of self-worth, potential risk of causing emotional/psychological/physical harm to their children, and children who themselves are often experiencing anger, frustration, sadness, emotional distress, fear, social and other forms of disadvantage.

The program is a self help, early intervention family support program that aims to work with families under stress to break the cycle of destructive and negative family behaviour, inspire good parenting, encourage the valuing of positive parent/child relationships, and raise the self-esteem of all participants. It is a strengths-based approach to working with parents, building the capacity of participants to bring about change.

Tasmania has one program already successfully operating at a Neighbourhood House in Mowbray. Participants can be referred by a range of services such as GP's, Family Child Health Nurses, Family Support Service or they can self-refer. Where participants do not have access to transport, this is provided and the program operates three days per week between 10am and 4pm.

With the support of the Commonwealth Government, the Intensive Parenting Program for at risk and vulnerable mothers will target about 90 vulnerable families across the State.

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<sup>18</sup> Karoly, L.A., Greenwood, P.W. et al., 1998. *Investing in our children: What we Know and Don't Know About the Costs and Benefits for Early Childhood Interventions*. RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA.

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<b>Action 24, with Commonwealth support:</b>	Jointly purchase new child care and preschool (kindergarten) places for very disadvantaged children, with distribution determined jointly at a State/Territory level
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<b>Action 25, with Commonwealth support:</b>	Establish dedicated liaison and coordination points between the Commonwealth and Tasmanian Governments in order to identify child care centres willing to take very disadvantaged children; and to facilitate appropriate access to Commonwealth/States funding programs
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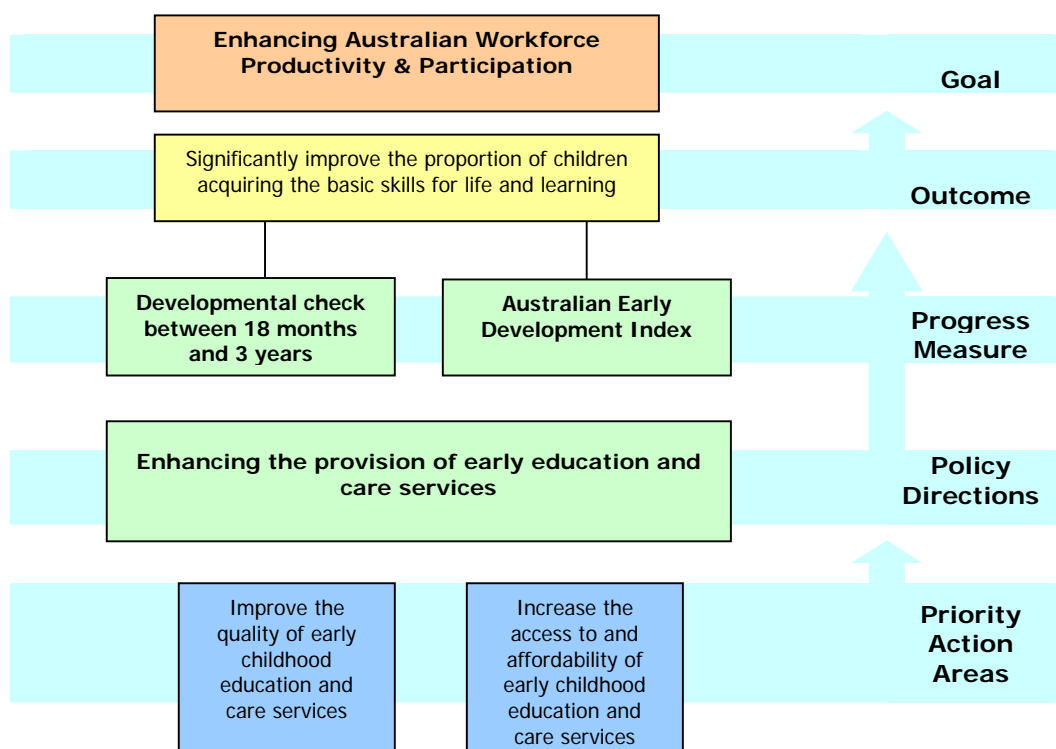
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There is considerable evidence that enrolment in quality child care programs that allow children to access a wide range of developmentally appropriate play activities can lead to better health, educational and wellbeing outcomes for very disadvantaged children.

In addition, the longer the duration and the higher the frequency of access to high quality child care, the greater the associated gains in IQ and school achievement. There is also good evidence that children most at risk make the greatest gains, and where the child care is accompanied by programs aimed at involving parents and/or the community, the gains for children are the greatest.

This is a strong argument for making child care more accessible to vulnerable children from families deemed to be at-risk.

**Policy Direction 3: Enhancing the provision of early education and care services**



There is strong evidence that the quality of care and education experienced in the early years provides the foundation for lifelong learning, including cognitive and non-cognitive skills development, which correlates with workforce participation and productivity outcomes later in life.

There are two priority areas for enhancing the provision of early education and care services that have been identified through the COAG process: improving the quality of services, and increasing access and affordability of services.

The quality of early childhood services can have a profound impact on children's development through out the life course. High quality services provide children with caring and nurturing learning programs, create and enhance family and community networks, and become a trusted source of information and support.

Improving the quality of services can be done through a range of options such as redesigning business processes and organisational structures through which services are delivered, improving the evidence base for early childhood development on which planning and implementation decisions are made, and providing appropriate professional learning and training opportunities for staff who provide early childhood and childcare services.

Helping parents reduce tension between their jobs and family life can benefit children, families, employers and society<sup>19</sup>. More families are using formal and informal child care services, but there are concerns about the cost and availability of those services.

Increasing the access and affordability of early education and child care services involves improving the supply and quality of early childhood staff, removing gaps in the supply of early childhood services, and ensuring that these services are convenient and flexible for parents as well as responsive to their needs in terms of their workforce participation and managing the work/life balance.

<sup>19</sup> Centre for Community Child Health, 2006. 'Work and Family Life Balance', *Policy Brief No. 3: Translating Early Childhood Research Evidence To Inform Policy And Practice*.

## ***Improve the quality of early childhood education and care services***

**Action 26:** Fund a consultancy to review and re-engineer business processes associated with Child Protection Services, Family Support Services, Statewide Intake Services, Child Protection After Hours Service, and Out-of-Home Care arrangements<sup>+</sup>

Based on the *Review of the Tasmanian Family Support Service* and the *Report on Child Protection Services in Tasmania*, the Tasmanian Government is funding a consultancy to review and re-engineer business processes associated with its child and family services, to ensure that service delivery is more efficient, better coordinated and more responsive to local needs. The model will focus on providing more accessible services that are available to children and families who require practical support and assistance before their situation escalates or their problems are compounded. The focus will be on early intervention that will prevent the need for referral to statutory child protection services or other tertiary services. It will include consideration of the integrated and cost-effective delivery of services to the 0-5 year age group.

At the conclusion of the consultancy, the Tasmanian Government will consider the recommendations and its response in the context of the policy directions and commitments reflected in this Jurisdiction Action Plan and the recommendations of the *Report on Child Protection Services in Tasmania*. As part of these considerations, the Tasmanian Government will seek opportunities to work together with the Commonwealth Government to provide better coordinated and integrated family support services.

**Action 27:** Legislate to create a Child Death Review Committee<sup>+</sup>

Unlike most states and territories (ACT and NT are the other exceptions) there is no legislation in Tasmania to mandate a process for investigation of deaths of children who have been involved with child protection services. Without legislation, it is discretionary for these deaths to be the subject of review.

In response to, and in accordance with, recommendations made by the Tasmanian Commissioner for Children, the Tasmanian Government will create a legislated process for investigating child deaths and serious injuries where the child has been involved with child protection services.

**Action 28:** Implement a new organisational structure of regional teams in Child and Family Services by aligning service areas with those of education and police services, and funding high level positions to entrench cross agency working<sup>+</sup>

**Action 29:** Establish a workforce development team in Children and Family Services to induct new staff, plan professional learning for all staff and improve the qualifications of individual staff through enrolment in the new early years degree at the University of Tasmania<sup>+</sup>

A new organisational structure for Children and Family Services is now being put in place, with the aim of better integrating the range of support services that are delivered to children and their families. The new structure creates four regional teams that share common boundaries with police, education and housing. This will make collaboration easier between different service areas.

The regional teams will include a wide range of key services to support children and families, including:

- Child, family, health services;
- Therapeutic and support services; and
- Child protection services.

Regional managers will work closely with their colleagues in other agencies and also with existing non-government services such as neighbourhood houses and community organisations, to improve access to support services.

Training and professional learning programs will be developed for all professional groups involved in delivering child and family services, to promote a coordinated approach and shared understanding of working with children and families.

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**Action 30:** Revise early learning curriculum for early childhood education and child care and provide professional learning

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The current Tasmanian curriculum provides a birth to 16 framework and is used in all schools and many child care centres.

Support for training and materials is required to expand its use in child care centres in light of the move to improve the quality of educational programs in these services. Additional work will be required to provide early years teachers with the capacity to deliver programs that provide the appropriate linkages between the range of birth to four programs currently being developed in schools and the Tasmanian curriculum.

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**Action 31:** Increase employment opportunities in the early years workforce and provide professional learning for all staff working with 0-5 year olds, as part of developing and expanding the birth-to-four early learning family support programs being implemented in primary schools. This will include:

- Funding the equivalent of 12 extra full-time early years teachers and 3 extra full-time staff in a combination of teacher aides, social workers and child health nurses;
  - Revising early learning curriculum for early childhood education and child care; and
  - Providing professional learning.
- 

Through the *Launching into Learning* initiative, the Tasmanian Government is committed to developing and expanding the birth-to-four early learning family support programs being implemented in primary schools.

Improving literacy and school readiness in the years before a child starts school has future economic and social benefits, and so the Tasmanian Government has committed funding to provide additional early childhood teachers and support staff to coordinate, lead and run strategies and programs that help young children get ready for school. The planning and development of the work in each school is lead by the Principal.

Professional learning for these staff has already commenced and will continue over the next four years. This professional learning will be offered to staff working in those services partnering with schools involved in *Launching into Learning*.

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**Action 32:** Improve the provision of quality early childhood education and child care services by:

Promoting access to Skills to Care: Supporting Quality Child Care, to further build the capacity of the ECEC workforce by upgrading the skills of early childhood workers through scholarships, bridging course, mentoring, post-development and training;

Supporting VET-in-schools childcare teachers to gain industry experience and exposure to current practices within the sector;  
Supporting the establishment of a Childcare Parents & Friends Association to help parents set standards and monitor the provision of quality early childhood care and education in Tasmania

**Action 33:** Support training in selected qualifications or units of competence for workers in non-government community based early childhood education and child care services (e.g. playgroups/play centres/child care centres), and review provision of publicly funded training in this area

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Child care is essential for parents to balance work and family, and children deserve quality child care with high standards. Recognising that parents need to be involved in these issues, the Tasmanian Government will provide annual funding to support the establishment and operations of a child care parents and friends association which provides a voice for parents who use child care.

The Tasmanian Government has helped to address a shortage of childcare in the state by building new child care centres alongside schools in areas of high demand. Co-locating childcare centres at schools is one way to give children an excellent start in life by ensuring that the transition between childcare and primary school is as smooth as possible.

The Tasmanian Government's Skills to Care initiative will support and train carers to take on child care management roles and reduce the turnover of staff in the child care industry.

This initiative will provide support and mentorship for newly qualified carers or those in their first "in-charge" role. It recognises that these carers are skilled practitioners who need additional support when they are asked to take on a higher-level role.

This initiative will also provide support for succession planning for service management positions. Evidence suggests that the lack of opportunity for leadership/management training is impacting on the number of staff with the capacity or willingness to take up the role of person in charge of the service.

The Tasmanian Government is also making funding available annually for scholarships to improve the supply of qualified staff in all child care sectors and to provide mentorship to individuals and services.

Funding has been allocated over four years to support and train carers to take on management roles and mentor newly qualified graduates to take on senior roles in services.

Bridging courses at various qualification levels are being developed between education and care both at the TAFE and University levels, to maximise pathways between the two and to further enhance the capacity and flexibility of the labour force.

#### **Proposed Multilateral Action**

*The following action is a proposed national/multilateral policy response involving all the States and Territories and the Commonwealth.*

Develop an intergovernmental agreement on a national approach to quality assurance and regulations for early childhood education and care.

### ***Increase the access to and affordability of early childhood education and care services***

**Action 34 with Commonwealth support:** Increase overtime the contact time four year olds spend in a kindergarten program, starting with the most disadvantaged children.

The Tasmanian Government has already substantially invested in high quality early childhood education for Tasmania's children, with \$13.36 million annually expended by the State on the 10-hour per week program.

This program is a universal free kindergarten delivered by qualified teachers together with a teacher aide in all government primary and district schools and most non-government schools. Almost 97 percent of eligible 4 year olds attend kindergarten in Tasmania. It is a quality service that is as an integrated element of the school system supported through the associated school infrastructure.

In addition, pro-rata funding is provided to kindergarten students in the non-government sector.

Given this investment has been in place for several decades, the increase of kindergarten hours, whilst welcomed in theory would require Commonwealth Government funding to implement.

This is particularly the case, given the Commonwealth's existing contribution to other jurisdictions through the provision of the Child Care Benefit (CCB) to the pre-school year and the proposal to increase the level of CCB that is payable in some cases.

Increasing the contact time four year olds spend in a kindergarten program would need to be achieved over time as evidence emerges, subject to workforce, infrastructure and resource issues.

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<sup>+</sup> Action covers age groups other than 0-5 year olds, with 0-5 year olds comprising approximately 40% of all children.

## **5. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE BUDGET ALLOCATION 2007-2010**

The Tasmanian Government's existing policies for the early years and this Jurisdictional Action Plan demonstrate its commitment to the Tasmania *Together* vision that '*all children living in Tasmania have the best possible start in life*'.

This Jurisdiction Action Plan recognises that reform is most effective when all levels of Government work together in a cohesive and cooperative manner to achieve common visions and goals.

A potential impediment to achieving substantial intergovernmental reform in the early years is that whilst most of the costs are incurred in the short term and by State Governments, most of the benefits accrue over the long term and to the Commonwealth Government. The split of financial benefits between the States and Territories and the Commonwealth has been modelled to be about 35:65 for early childhood education and care.

The National Competition Policy funding and institutional arrangements overcame this problem by providing incentives to encourage and support States and Territories to undertake these reforms. As the OECD commented "there is no doubt that reform would have been far slower and less comprehensive without competition payments".

In view of the above, the Tasmanian Government has committed funding of \$17.5 million over the next four years to new initiatives since COAG announced its National Reform Agenda in February 2006 to further improve the outcomes for children aged 0-5 years.

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