

CHILDREN'S POLICY FRAMEWORK CONSULTATION REPORT

INTRODUCTION

Community stakeholder consultations by way of focus groups, visits to a range of child care, development and learning settings, and public invitation to submit written comments, were held during March and April 2002 to provide input to the development of an NT Vision and Policy Framework for Children's Care, Development and Learning from 0-12 years.

Two separate background documents were also available to provide background to the consultations: "Caring for Territory Children – from the 70s to the new millennium" and "What do we understand about young children? – conclusions drawn from recent literature and experience".

Focus groups, consisting of parents, representatives from special needs groups, peak body representatives, service providers from the child care, education, health, local government and community councils, welfare agencies, sport & recreation sectors, were held in Alice Springs, Darwin, Palmerston, Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala, Katherine, Tennant Creek, Jabiru and Oenpelli.

Focus groups were also held with Office of Youth Affairs Youth Round Table, Darwin and Palmerston City Council Youth Forum representatives, a Senior's Group, a Meeting Other Parents Group, a group of Maternal and Child Health Nurses from Darwin and Palmerston Community Care Centres and a group of Indigenous Educators.

The results from a significant number of consultations with Indigenous People and Communities about Child and Family Issues held between 1990-2001 were summarised and included as part of the background to the development of the policy framework.

The scope of the Children's Policy Framework focusses not only on health and primary education but the range of services and activities providing care and support for young children outside these service systems, such as children's care services, child development support and parenting support and information. These include early childhood and family support services such as community health and maternal & child health services, speech, hearing and other specialist and early intervention services, child care, long day care, family day care, occasional care and outside school hours care, pre-schools, playgroups, early parenting support programs, neighbourhood and women's resource centres, school nurses, school counsellors, schools, child protection, family support, sport and recreation, police, libraries and life education.

FINDINGS

The input from the community consultations supported the proposed policy framework developed from the OECD research findings of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy and the six guiding principles as outlined in the proposed vision and policy framework for children's care, development and learning "Public Invitation to Contribute" document. There was general support for the proposed vision with a number of suggestions for slight modification and comments in relation to "how to" put it into practice.



SUMMARY OF INPUT FROM WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS

A total of 35 written contributions were submitted from a range of peak organisations and individuals. Responses were sought on the proposed vision; what areas the departments should pay particular attention to in moving towards this vision; what might putting this vision and principles into practice mean for you, your organisation or the system of services available to support children's care, development and learning that exists now; and comments on the long-term directions that should be taken by the NT Department of Health & Community Services and Department of Employment, Education & Training.

The responses were summarised and grouped under similar categories to the guiding principles as set out in the "Public Invitation to Contribute" document:

Public investment to reflect importance of early years

- Strongly agree with the need to formalise the early years to set the grounding for a person's future development and public investment in services, infrastructure and resources to reflect the importance of the 0-12 year age group.
- Develop "child and parent friendly" public places and workplace policies and practices.
- Improve the status, wages and conditions of child care workers.

Working together for an integrated planning and services delivery approach

- Greater communication, collaboration and integration required between agencies, services, parents, the community and government.
- All departments to involve all levels of the community in their planning and evaluation processes.
- All departments to continue to inform all levels of the community about their directions and initiatives, to have on-going consultation and transparent government with involvement of all stakeholders.
- Government to put structures/mechanisms in place to meet policy recommendations to attempt to achieve the vision.

Better access to culturally appropriate universal and particular services and supports

- Culturally appropriate programs, services, supports and education need to be developed in consultation with Indigenous parents and communities.
- More Indigenous teachers and role models.
- Accurate indigenous history and culture to be taught in NT schools.
- The government to address basic health issues such as chronic ear disease and anaemia in Aboriginal children.
- Parental support and education is of paramount importance.
- Increase and maintain preventative, educative programs such as Parents as Teachers and the former Indigenous Hearing Program.
- Establish a network of Primary School Counselling services.
- Better access to school therapy and services for children with special needs in remote areas.
- Increase the number of professional staff to support early intervention programs and services for children.
- Establish and maintain existing innovative and flexible responses in remote areas and smaller centres to ensure children and families receive support, information and services eg mobile libraries, playgroups and pre-schools.

- Attention needed as to “how” the departments can support Principles 2 and 3.

SUMMARY OF INPUT FROM CONSULTATIONS WITH INDIGENOUS GROUPS AND COMMUNITIES

- Whole of community research before establishing services and then development of community action plans. External planners should always work in close communication with the community to develop services that suit local needs.
- Governments and departments should co-operate to improve service delivery.
- Government departments should provide communities with information about their responsibilities and field officer contact details.
- Research and evaluation should be on-going.
- Aboriginal language and culture should be taught in mainstream schools.
- Nutrition programs and recreation workers should be in all NT communities.
- Healthy foods should be available at reasonable prices in all NT communities.
- Appropriate training of non-aboriginal staff to understand cultural complexities of cross-cultural contexts.

SUMMARY OF INPUT FROM COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDER FOCUS GROUPS

A total of 15 focus groups were held throughout the Territory with approximately 183 people consulted, including those visited at specific centres. Participants in each focus group were invited to comment on what are the supports for and the barriers to children’s care, development and learning that need to be in place in the NT and what system shifts need to occur in order to achieve the proposed vision for NT children.

Input from the Focus Groups have been categorised under similar headings to the 6 guiding principles as listed in the “Public Invitation to Submit Contributions” document.

Access to culturally relevant universal and particular services, activities and information

- Need to establish a network of Counsellors in Primary and Secondary Schools to address the range of family, relationship and adjustment issues confronting children in school settings.
- Increase access to and availability of a range of sport and recreation activities including learn to swim programs for all NT children.
- Importance of preventative parent support, education and information eg Parents as Teachers Program.
- Education needs to be more culturally relevant for Aboriginal children on remote communities.
- Increase access to a range of mobile services eg toy library, playgroups and pre-school, to families and children in remote areas.
- Increase access to education for Aboriginal parents to assist them to understand the need for their children to attend school.
- Poor health, in particular hearing problems, of Indigenous children is a barrier to effective education.
- Use successful Aboriginal people as role models including people in the local community.
- Increase access to flexible childcare arrangements – short term, extended and casual care.
- Improve access to information about services for families and children – information needs to be available at a wider range of locations and outlets.

- Aboriginal language and culture needs to be part of the core curriculum for NT children.

Quality services and supports

- Open and transparent policy development. Reflect these consultation results in the policy.
- Good quality care and education (workforce training) – disability support training is a gap in child care courses.
- Parental ownership of information regarding their children and ante-natal records.

Working together – systematic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation.

Most responses were concerned with this area.

- Problems with boundaries between DHACS and DEET in relation to supporting children with special needs – wrong to split children’s needs along bureaucratic lines.
- Set up networks of “one stop shop” multi-purpose resource and information centres – (health, education, play, family support) to address the high level of parental frustration in trying to access services and supports.
- Need for government and the community to work together at policy and systems levels.
- Government to demonstrate transparency in decision-making.
- Health and Education “zones” need to be the same.
- Put children at the centre of policy.
- Use schools as community resources.
- Leadership needed across Departments and sectors as well as a much closer relationship between health and education – especially in the area of disability support.
- Government has a role and responsibility as facilitator for community involvement to support children.
- Government to boost networks for service providers and families with consumer input.
- Community input to changes.
- Local ownership, solutions and decision-making, with involvement of Local Councils.
- Policy framework needs to take account of diversity within the NT population – classes needed for gifted children and flexible policy approaches needed to address indigenous kids not attending school.
- Need broader focus on school and learning – not just concentrate solely on literacy and numeracy but include a range of learning approaches inside and outside the classroom.
- Community forums (extend focus group concept) needed for sharing information – services are all physically separated – not good for interests of the child – need for regional coordination and re-focussing of departmental positions and job descriptions.
- Stop competitive nature of funding – promote collaborative approach that results in integration.
- Systemic approach needed to address the wide range of community health and welfare issues affecting children’s health and education in remote communities eg lack of sleep, fresh food, chronic hearing problems etc.
- Build partnerships between DEET and the Land Councils, NTU, BITE, IAD, ATSIC etc.

- Synchronise health/education portfolios and strategic plans/activities.

Public investment in services infrastructure

- Public recognition of vital early years – care for children is under valued.
- Security of funding to provide continuity in services. Pilots, if working and successful, need to keep going – not axed eg Parents as Teachers.
- Different funding sources (Commonwealth and NT Government) instead of pooling of funds.
- Support models that are working.
- Stop the competitive nature of funding.

Skilled workforce, adequate in number and capacities

- Promote and support broad flexible career pathways for workers across education, care and family services settings.
- Well-trained, skilled and knowledgeable, well supported (including in remote areas) workforce.
- Consistency and continuity in service provision.
- Valuing those who work with children.
- Try to give the responsibility back to parents.
- Flexible departmental arrangements to encourage health and education staff to work in remote communities.
- Higher profile of indigenous people in the workforce.
- Increase professional support for Indigenous staff in child care and school settings.
- More sport and recreation officers needed for all age groups.

On-going evaluation and research is essential

- Importance of on-going evaluation and monitoring – long term view.
- Evaluation and school appraisals to involve parents, professionals and the community – a dynamic, on-going process.

POLICY SHIFTS NEEDED

1. Government resources and infrastructure should reflect the importance of the early childhood years on a child's future development, learning and well-being. This implies access to preventative, educative parental support and information, establishing networks of counselling and recreation services, improving the status and conditions of people working with children, broadening career pathways, creating more "child and parent friendly" public place and workplace policies and practices, offering more flexible workplace opportunities for workers in remote communities and more flexible options for delivery of services for children and families to remote areas.
2. Support to and involvement of parents, families and communities in the implementation of the Children's Policy Framework. This implies the facilitation of on-going community feedback and information sharing mechanisms to ensure this occurs.
3. Policy and practice should reflect an appreciation of and respect for the different cultural circumstances and different locational factors impacting on families and children throughout the NT.