



For years, commentators have focused on the negative impact of fragmented, and confusing policy funding and regulatory frameworks on the quality of early childhood education and care in Australia. Finally, we are starting to see action to address this, with the national review of early childhood quality issues, and the development of a nationally integrated, streamlined system of quality assurance and accountability, sponsored by the Council of Australian Governments. These initiatives promise to make Australian children's early childhood experiences among the best in the world.

As we know, there is robust evidence pointing to the positive impact of good health, emotional development and social skills on adjustment to school and later social and academic competence, and long-term wellbeing and employment. Social, political and financial investments in early childhood services, policy, infrastructure and operations underpin these successes.

The combination of national quality standards, which will provide consistency across early childhood service types,

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with a nationally agreed Early Years Learning Framework - plus a guaranteed 15 hours of preschool for four-year-olds - will give all children access to educationally and developmentally significant early learning experiences before school starts. Ensuring more consistent early education experiences, regardless of children's location or socioeconomic background, is a key step in closing the gap in educational opportunities and achievement. But it will take time to achieve.

These current initiatives are premised on the understanding that young children's care and education should be integrated and seamless to make better sense - structurally, developmentally and pedagogically. We know that care and education must go hand in hand.

In moving forward we must remember the complexity and diversity of the early childhood landscape. There is enormous cultural diversity in Australia and we must honour and build on families' cultural traditions, while enabling all children to acquire social and emotional experience and skills known to underpin successful school learning. Importantly, children and families with 'additional needs' - including new English-language learners and children with disabilities or learning difficulties - must be included.

In this issue of *Every Child* magazine, we capture key ideas underpinning the quest for quality in children's services and supporting children's wellbeing, especially their social and emotional development. Our writers highlight a range of issues including practitioner roles in supporting families undergoing upheaval, and children suffering the effects of trauma and loss through the death of loved ones, cultural dislocation and bullying.



We are also reminded by Sue Grieshaber's article that, in any discussion about developing more consistent national standards around young children's developmental and learning pathways, the reform process must be mindful of evidence pointing to the role of play in promoting young children's development and learning.

A new quality assurance framework for all early childhood services, with an in-built Early Years Learning Framework, will better ensure consistently high-quality education and care for young children around the country. Children, families and the community need this assurance.

No-one underestimates the challenges ahead in re-envisioning a sector that straddles the public world of education, political accountability and productivity, and the private, intimate world of family and child-rearing. But reshaping Australia's children's services to make them the best in the world is a task that has the support and commitment of all who want the best for children.

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