

Core care conditions for children and families: implications for integrated child and family services

This brief is based on a paper released in July 2021 for Social Ventures Australia by the Centre for Community Child Health, a research group of Murdoch Children's Research Institute and a department of The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.



The Centre for Community Child Health has prepared two papers for Social Ventures Australia on integrated child and family services. The papers explore the potential of holistic, integrated early learning service models to improve outcomes for young children and their families who are experiencing vulnerability. The first paper reviews what is known about the core needs of children, parents and families, the conditions that parents require to meet the needs of their children, and how well the service system is meeting those needs. It utilises this evidence to identify what role integrated child and family centres (ICFCs) could play in addressing the needs of children and families.

Integrated child and family centre (ICFC) is a broad term used to describe service models that aim to meet the needs of children and families through the integration of service provision. Services may be provided at a single location, or children and families can be referred to, and easily access the services they need via a single-entry point.

"SVA's vision of a holistic integrated early learning model would potentially fill an important gap in the early years' environment for children and families."

Dr. Tim Moore, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Community Child Health

There are various models of ICFCs across Australia that support children and families experiencing vulnerability, particularly those who may not receive the appropriate support through the universal early childhood and care system.

Key findings



There is a wealth of evidence regarding child development and the factors that shape development and learning. However, efforts to improve outcomes for young children have focused largely on improvements to existing services and service systems. To date, this approach has not made significant improvements to child and family outcomes that are of concern.



Focusing mainly on improvements to existing services ignores the fact that the social and physical conditions under which families are raising young children can have a greater impact on child and family outcomes than the services they receive. There needs to be a greater focus on improving these conditions if outcomes are to be improved.



The needs of children, parents and caregivers are set out in a proposed Core Care Conditions for Children and Families framework. This identifies the core care needs of children, the parents and caregivers, plus those that children and families share.



The Core Care Conditions for Children and Families framework can be used to assess how well the current early years system is meeting the nurturing care needs of children and families, and what role integrated child and family centres can play.



Integrated child and family centres can play an important part in meeting many of the needs of children and families. They can play two critical roles: they can act as a social hub, providing a local place where families can go to build social networks, and they can act as a service hub, providing families with access to a wide range of child and family services.

Historical context

Rapid social and economic changes over the past half century have altered the economic and social conditions under which families are raising young children. While many people have benefited greatly from these changes, a significant minority of children and families have not. As a result, they are experiencing major social, psychological and health problems.

“Despite the rising improvements in general prosperity over this period, major social, psychological and health problems persist, especially among the more disadvantaged families.”

Dr. Tim Moore, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Community Child Health

Reimagining the early childhood system

In seeking to address these complex issues, governments have put more effort into improving services and service systems than on improving the conditions under which families are raising young children. So far, this approach has not been sufficient to make a significant improvement to the child and family outcomes that are of concern.

There are several reasons for this, including:

- Services are not provided effectively or equitably
- Services are not integrated but are provided as stand-alone services with separate funding streams
- Silos within departments and agencies inhibit service integration to support families
- Focussing on services ignores the fact that the conditions under which families are raising young children can have a greater impact on outcomes than the services they receive, and
- The problems to be addressed are often identified and framed by professionals and governments, rather than by families and communities themselves, and therefore may not be seen by them as addressing the issues that that their greatest concerns.

The paper considers other ways to improve outcomes for children and families experiencing disadvantage. It does this by exploring the core needs of children and families and identifying the conditions that are needed to support parents in meeting these needs. These are broadly grouped as relational, safety and protection, health and nutrition, learning and activity, environmental, and material needs. Children’s needs cannot be met by families alone. They require access to a wider support network, high quality services and the relevant actions and policies of governments to facilitate these.

Core Care Conditions for Children and Families framework

The proposed framework is divided into three sections: children’s needs, parental/caregiver needs, and shared child and family needs (see diagram on last page). This framework can be used to assess whether the current early years system is meeting the needs of children and families.

Children's needs	Parental / caregiver needs	Shared child and family needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure relationships with primary caregivers able to provide the responsive caregiving needed to build secure attachments • Support for developing emotional and self-regulation skills • Positive early learning environments, in the home as well as in ECEC and community settings • Opportunities to mix with other children of different ages, and to build social skills • Adequate and appropriate nutrition from conception onwards • Support to establish regular sleep patterns • Physical opportunities to play and explore • Protection from relationship stresses – abuse and neglect by caregivers, exposure to family or community violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure time to build relationships with the newborn (paid maternity/paternity leave) • Positive social support networks (including support from family, friends, fellow parents and neighbours) • Safe and easily accessible places to meet other families • Access to relationally-based family-centred services • Access to universal services during antenatal / perinatal / postnatal periods • Access to specialist support services to address additional personal needs (e.g. mental health issues, relational violence) • Information about childcare and development, and support for managing the challenges of parenting • Availability of learning opportunities to build personal capabilities • Inclusiveness of the immediate social environment – absence of racism or discrimination • Employment opportunities and family-friendly employment conditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure and affordable housing • Financial / employment security • Healthy physical environment (clean air and water, freedom and environmental toxins, green spaces) • Safe and easily navigable built environments • Ready access to family-friendly recreational and other facilities (libraries, swimming pools, sporting facilities, playgrounds) • Healthy food environments that provide access to fresh food outlets • Access to support services to address exceptional family needs (e.g. financial counselling, housing services) • Inclusiveness of the wider society – absence of racism or discrimination

Conclusions on the role of ICFCs

ICFCs have the potential to play an important part in meeting many of the needs of children and their families. They provide a local place where children and families can go, build social networks, and get support from other parents with young children. ICFCs can also provide a safe and positive relational environment where the child is protected from abuse or neglect. They can support children in building secure attachments and in the development of self-regulation and other skills. ICFCs can also promote healthy nutrition and hygiene practices and provide opportunities for physical activity and play.

ICFCs also act as a hub that provides access to a range of health care and other services. These also support parents in developing positive parenting practices, and assisting in the early identification and management of health or developmental concerns for children and families. Holistic early learning models can potentially fill a gap in the early years' environment for children and families.

"...[ICFCs] can provide a local place where children and families can go, and where they can build social networks and get support from other parents with young children."

Dr. Tim Moore, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Community Child Health

