

## Why free early childhood education? A policy based on evidence and children's rights

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The Government's policy is to provide up to 20 hours free optional early childhood education to all 3- and 4-year-olds in teacher-led services from July 2007. This initiative came with widespread early childhood education sector support, having been promoted as a goal by sector representatives and individuals who participated in the working group to develop the early childhood education strategic plan. The working group's vision was for "an entitlement to a reasonable amount of free early childhood education for all children before they start school" (Working Group for the Development of the Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education, 2001).

New Zealand's adoption of a policy of free early childhood education is in keeping with trends in OECD countries to provide at least two years free provision before children start school. A free universal approach has long been adopted in some countries: in Italy from age 3 years, in Belgium (Flemish and French communities) from 30 months, and in the Netherlands from age 4 (OECD, 2001). More recently other countries have come to regard free provision as a priority, including England where 3- and 4-year-olds are entitled to a part-time early childhood education place, comprising five 2½-hour sessions per week for 11 weeks each term. One issue being aired now is how to expand the entitlement to younger children and for longer hours. According to the Daycare Trust in England, while "parents have welcomed the initiative and the take-up of free places has been very high", the hours are insufficient for parents in paid employment (Daycare Trust, 2004).

Arguments for early childhood education to be free are based on research evidence on benefits of early childhood education and arguments for a rights-based approach to education of young children.

Participation in good quality early childhood education benefits children. Knowledge, skills, and dispositions developed in the early years equip a child to be a successful learner and participate constructively in society. Children who have experienced good quality early childhood education have higher performance on average than children who do not have this experience. These differences are enduring throughout a child's schooling and into adulthood (Boocock, Barnett, & Frede, 2001).

Any participation in good quality early childhood education is valuable. But the length of time children participate and their hours of attendance per week also make a difference. A range of studies, including the Competent Children study in New Zealand, the large-scale Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years project in the UK, and Swedish studies, found children who attend good quality early childhood education for longer (three or more years) do better on performance measures. There is less evidence about what is a desirable number of hours per week for children of different ages, but the up to 20 hours per week free to be offered in New Zealand falls within the range of optimal intensity for children's learning and wellbeing.

Recently, the Early Childhood Council (Early Childhood Council, 2006) argued that the free early childhood education policy should be modified to fund 20 free hours for the "most disadvantaged" children. However, a targeted approach would not serve the best interests of children at risk, and does not address the needs of children who are not at risk.

Targeted approaches rely on costly and time-consuming administrative processes that can stigmatise eligible families, deterring applications for assistance. There are issues about how to set criteria for "disadvantage" and assess these, and problems about children at the margins who do not meet criteria missing out. There is a danger of "ghettoising" at-risk children, when research indicates that children from disadvantaged homes do better in centres that have more advantaged children in the same group (Jacobsen, 2003).

Recently, there has been advocacy to develop policy framed around the participatory rights of children. Provision of free early childhood education for all children whose parents see they would benefit from the opportunity is consistent with such rights.

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